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FROM *LA COSA NOSTRA* TO *LA CULTURA DEL NARCISISMO*:  
PSYCHOANALYSIS AS PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY IN *THE SOPRANOS*

THOMAS BROWN

78 pages

The aims for this thesis are to further investigate the show's use of Tony's psychotherapy as a narrative device in building the relationship between the work of art and the spectator. This device, I argue, possesses a Brechtian character: it not only breaks up the narrative action, but it also comments upon it. Most importantly, this device grounds spectators in a psychoanalytic outlook which enables the spectator to analyze the show's central anti-hero, interpret the series of events around him, as well as the criticize the American climate he is a symbol for. I advance the thesis that *The Sopranos*, in setting up a Brechtian structure of spectatorship with its audience, raised psychoanalysis into a *public philosophy*.

KEYWORDS: The Sopranos; Television History; Postmodernism; Brecht; Psychoanalysis; Christopher Lasch

FROM *LA COSA NOSTRA* TO *LA CULTURA DEL NARCISISMO*:  
PSYCHOANALYSIS AS PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY IN *THE SOPRANOS*

THOMAS BROWN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Theatre and Dance

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2023

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FROM *LA COSA NOSTRA* TO *LA CULTURA DEL NARCISISMO*:  
PSYCHOANALYSIS AS PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY IN *THE SOPRANOS*

THOMAS BROWN

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Kee-Yoon Nahm, Chair

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Li Zeng

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We put our love where we have put our labor.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

I would like to extend a thank you to my friends and especially my family for their constant support, spiritually and materially. My interest in the show was a product of my deep love and gratitude for them in the first place, and this work would not have been possible without their unfailing virtue.

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T.B.

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## INTRODUCTION: COMING IN AT THE END

In June of 2021, on a Monday morning, I sat down on the couch in my house, alone, and turned on *The Sopranos* with the intention of watching one or two episodes. Eight hours later, I decided to get up, hit the gym, and grab a bite to eat. (I got an Italian sub from Jersey Mike's.) It only took me those eight hours to start to pick up on what has drawn so many others to it: scholars, critics, the show's original target audiences—millennials and older, generally urbane and liberal, upper-middle class HBO subscribers—and its newest champions—Gen-Z. (Staley “Why is Every Young Person Watching”; Polan 72)

The first thing I noticed about the show was that it was a masterclass in storytelling. The moment work—carried out by the show's actors, directors, and technicians—subtleties in delivery and interesting choices in lighting, framing, and editing—kept me attentive from frame to frame, something I certainly was not used to with American television. (It was also extremely humorous, and profane, too: two more UFOs above “TV land.”) As I continued watching that first season, I realized how intricate the show was in tying small events along a variety of sub-plotlines (the deterioration of the relationship between Tony and his mother, Livia; Tony's war with his Uncle Junior; the Medea-like attempt at betrayal borne out between Livia and Junior; Carmela's near-affair with Father Phil; Meadow and A.J.'s growing pains; Christopher's search for identity; etc.).

This sort of narrative complexity hearkened back to my richest experiences with literature. In particular, it recalled some of the great dramatists, domestic and abroad, with which I had come into contact in my undergraduate. Years of training in the theatre as an actor had given me many opportunities to experience the joys of storytelling and the craft necessary to pursue it. My readings

of Arthur Miller, Clifford Odets, Eric Bogosian, as well as of radical black dramatists such as Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson, Suzi Lori-Parks, Anna Deavere Smith, and Dominique Morriseau, all summoned an awareness of drama as a means of serious American social criticism. As a socialist, my study of Bertolt Brecht served as a touchstone for my understanding of theatre as a tool for political education.

He, along with other Frankfurt School intellectuals like Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno, Leo Lowenthal, and (more or less affiliated with that program) Walter Benjamin, also provided me a template for a neo-Marxist interpretation of mass culture able to respond to the commodification of art. These critics mourned the decay of artistic autonomy (and “aura”), eroded, in their minds, by the rationalization of culture and the relegation of art to factory-like conditions and distribution on the universal market. They also railed against the submissive, conformist ideology tethered to the new works of mass culture—Brecht on naturalism, Kracauer on the Tiller Girls, Adorno on jazz, Benjamin on Mickey Mouse—and characterized the so-called “culture industry” as “mass deception,” in Adorno’s words, or “distraction factories,” in Kracauer’s (terms which inevitably recall Marx’s formulation “opiate of the people” or Engels’s term “false consciousness”). (Brecht “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” “The Popular and the Realistic”; Kracauer “The Mass Ornament”; Adorno *The Culture Industry*; Lowenthal “Historical Perspectives on Popular Culture”; Benjamin “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” “Theory of Distraction,” “Mickey Mouse”)

My dual grounding in the stage tradition and neo-Marxism bequeathed me, I can now see, with a condescending attitude towards television, which I viewed as a technological invasion upon art with its seductive substitution of narrative with spectacle and its domestication of forms of performance that had previously been public, and therefore, in my mind, civically engaged. I

certainly was of the opinion that TV is inherently escapist in utility, too sunny in predisposition and too optimistic about the present state of our society and its future.

With this bias on hand, it is surprising that I gave *The Sopranos* a shot in the first place. Yet as I watched that first season, it also became very clear to me that *The Sopranos* was different from other TV I had watched on those very grounds; it was, hour by hour, dramatizing and dealing seriously with many of the features of American society other TV wouldn't dare: class society; rampant consumerism (only one form of addiction, which also figures prominently in the show); racism; ethnic identity and cultural amnesia; the normalization of violence; the death of family without an attendant death of patriarchy; the paranoid American personality.

*The Sopranos* even trespassed these socio-political considerations and began to haunt me on a personal level. Like so many other men who have watched the show, Tony's visitations to therapy challenged my relationship with myself and my mental health. ("...we've even been given awards by psychiatric associations. Psychiatrists say they've got more men coming in. A surprising number of people seem to remember that their mother had tried to kill them," series creator David Chase once pointed out to an interviewer. [Peyser "HBO's Godfather"]) I identified immediately (with reservations) with the show's infamous anti-hero protagonist, Tony Soprano, with respect to his pervading sense of loss, his yearning for more under conditions that militate against it, his aggravation with the senselessness surrounding him (and the senselessness within.)

And with all its resonant family themes, *The Sopranos* also begged reevaluation of my relationship with my own flesh and blood. Even if I identified with Tony, I really felt like I was seeing my father in him. Tony's odyssey, in some strange way, recalled my dad's life story. My father, to be sure, has no immigrant history to relive. But he came up in the same rugged, lower-middle-class milieu that defined Tony's socioeconomic heritage and had been surrounded by the

same types of ‘borderline’ personalities in his own nuclear family that populated Tony’s childhood unit. I viewed Tony’s (occasional) heroic striving to rise above his conditions as parallel to my dad’s; I saw Tony’s deep love for his daughter and son (his one unquestionable virtue, as many commentators on the series have asserted) as *compare*, one and the same, with my father’s love for my sister and me.

Alongside this personal dimension—or, rather, *through* this personal dimension, once it is accepted as an axiom that objective political and economic structures are reflected in the subjective materials of everyday personal life—it appeared to me rather quickly that *The Sopranos* was laying bare our society’s ills, public and private, as opposed to caking them in lipstick as is usually the *opus moderandi* of American TV. I was awestruck with the notion that a work of popular culture might actually share my view of America.

In retrospect, however, it has become clear that *The Sopranos* belongs to a long yet curious tradition of American social criticism which is sharply critical of contemporary materialism, generally illiberal in its orientation, and bears some distant residue of a lower-middle-class, *petit-bourgeois* character. It is critical of consumerism, greed, and capitalism itself (insofar as it actually develops a critical theory of political economy), but it does not possess the faith in the future that characterizes orthodox leftisms. It retains a conservative impulse that we live in a time of cultural decline and an insistence that (certain) people in the past may have, in fact, lived better lives.

The connection may at first appear obscure, so it requires some explication. I had first heard of *The Sopranos* on “Red Scare,” a pop culture podcast hosted by a pair of New York City-based bohemians, Anna Khachiyani and Dasha Nekrasova, with vocal fry and a puzzling ideological texture, belonging most comfortably, it seems, along the so-called ‘post-left.’ My patronage of that podcast was itself initiated through a mutual interest in the work of the cultural historian and social

critic Christopher Lasch, whose view of America was borne out from a grimacing Freudo-Marxian outlook which deplored much of what is known under the rubric of ‘the postmodern,’ or, as Lasch called it, *The Culture of Narcissism*. I read this book—along with his *magnum opus*, *The True and Only Heaven*—with much attention in my undergraduate, for even though these volumes were by then quite dated (1979 and 1991, respectively), they still seemed to explain so much about my surroundings: the way advanced capitalism deteriorates public and private life by divorcing and invading them; the way it undermines the long-standing morals, absolutely essential to the good life, of loyalty and self-denial; and the way it forces individuals to exchange long-term happiness for short-term advancement and thrills; and, especially, the way it dislocates community, family, and even selfhood itself.

Recently, a regeneration of popular interest in Lasch’s work has existed alongside a recent surge in *Sopranos* fandom (as we shall investigate in a moment). Until now, these developments have been understood in explicit isolation from one another. A large part of my contention in what follows is that they are intricately connected under the surface, because both belong to the same tradition of American social criticism. The disquieting suggestions outlined by Lasch always find some sort of correlative in *The Sopranos*: the emptiness of the Idea of Progress, and even the suggestion that history may be governed by a directly obverse pattern of decline; the incapacity for Reason to undo social wrongs; the upper-middle classes and their liberalism as bankrupt; the social invasion of the home and of the self; ‘the therapeutic’ as a moral failure; in short, all of the headlines in the characterization of America as a “culture of narcissism.” In real time, we are watching younger leftists appropriating both Lasch and *The Sopranos* in a generalized revolt against postmodern, neoliberal capitalism; I merely seek to tentatively connect these phenomena.

All said: these formative experiences, aesthetic and intellectual, cleared the way for a passionate appreciation for *The Sopranos* while also structuring a set of expectations that would subsequently be obliterated. I hadn't thought it reasonable to expect masterful storytelling on TV; nor did I think it even possible to achieve social criticism through that medium—especially not a mode of social criticism with any proximity to the work of one relatively obscure and politically radical historian in particular (who, furthermore, had died years before the show had even been conceived). But, against all odds, that was what I encountered in *The Sopranos* as across the next seven weeks (several of which were spent outside of the U.S., in the Mediterranean) I watched all 86 installments of *The Sopranos*.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As I completed the series (only, of course, to start it over), I started to branch out and measure the way others responded to the series. I naturally wondered if my interpretation of the show was not just the work of a young man wanting to feel ‘seen’ through and by a work of popular culture (as is so often the case among members of my generation—and generations before my own, as a matter of fact). Yet, as I followed “*Sopranos* meme” pages and joined social media groups, on top of reading what critics and scholars have had to say about it, I took heart that I was not alone. As it became evident to me by combing through social media—whether in YouTube comment sections, niche Instagram meme accounts, Facebook groups, and the bustling world of *Sopranos* podcasting—many others were seeing in the show the same things I saw.

That impression was further reinforced by a think-piece from the *New York Times* in October 2021 entitled, “Why Is Every Young Person in America Watching ‘The Sopranos’?” In that article, Willy Staley interrogates a recent explosion in popular interest towards the show, remarkably left-wing in character and largely located within so-called “Gen Z.” He gestures towards that very same proliferating body of podcasts (“Red Scare” included) and meme pages that I had experienced firsthand. Not least because I still sense myself as part of the phenomenon Staley isolates and examines, I share Staley’s basic question, which serves as a launching pad for this thesis: why should a twenty-year-old television show about a violent, corrupt, bigoted, and chronically depressed mob boss who seeks out psychotherapy continue to find resonance with American audiences, especially those young progressives with a predisposition to see their generation as dragging society into the modern age? Staley insists that this reading is to be

associated explicitly with Gen Z by contrasting them against the show's original target television audience:

... back then, they were the fortunate 28 million Americans who had HBO subscriptions and, possibly, TiVo. They were the same self-regarding upper middle class that the Soprano family aspired to join, and who let them in at arm's length for their own amusement—people like Dr. Melfi's therapist, Elliot Kupferberg; or the Cusamanos, who lived next door. These characters were audience surrogates, and Chase plainly held them in contempt. But new viewers don't identify with those characters; instead, they see in them their parents, whose HBO login they stole, or the rich friend's parents whose login they stole, or just some yuppie Boomer nitwits. Younger viewers do not have to fear Chase's wrath, because they are not so obviously its object. They are also able to watch the show for hours on end, which makes the subtext and themes more apparent. Perhaps all of this has offered clarity that was not possible when the show aired. Perhaps it is easier now to see exactly who—or what—Chase was angry at. (“Why is Every Young Person Watching”)

My suspicion, however, is that this reading is the natural product of elements within the fabric of the show itself, not generational consciousness alone. Staley himself provides some analysis to suggest just as such:

The show's depiction of contemporary America as relentlessly banal and hollow is plainly at the core of the current interest in the show, which coincides with an era of crisis across just about every major institution in American life. *The Sopranos* has a persistent focus on the spiritual and moral vacuum at the center of this country, and is oddly prescient about its coming troubles: the opioid epidemic, the crisis of meritocracy, teenage depression and suicide, fights over the meaning of American history. Even the flight of the ducks who had taken up residence in Tony's swimming pool—not to mention all the lingering shots on the swaying flora of North Jersey—reads differently now, in an era of unprecedented environmental degradation and ruin. (“Why is Every Young Person Watching”)

The idea raised here, in other words, is that social criticism is integral to *The Sopranos*, a part of the basic fabric of its essence; it is embedded into the thematic, narrative, and formal characteristics of the show itself. Perhaps, then, a taking apart and reassembly of the work of art might help us



make better sense of how it encourages viewers—Gen-Z leftists, to be sure, and others as well—to see American society from a certain vantage point.

It seemed to me, after first reading Staley’s article, that a better understanding of the aesthetics of *The Sopranos*—in particular, the relationship it sets up with its viewers—was necessary in order to understand how it makes an art of social criticism. Staley’s article itself pointed me directly to Emily Nussbaum’s important “The Long Con,” a retrospective published right after the airing of the series’ final episode which depicts the show as a long dialogue between creator David Chase and his audience, even suggesting a metaphor between that relationship between artist and viewer and the function of therapy within the show:

Chase was the first TV creator to truly take advantage, in every sense, of the odd bond a series has with its audience: an intimate dynamic that builds over time, like any therapeutic relationship... It is a collaboration, with viewer response providing a crucial feedback loop—a fitting dynamic for a mob story, a genre predicated on a certain level of bloodlust in its audience. For eight years, the characters themselves obsessively watched (and quoted and analyzed and emulated) *GoodFellas* and *The Godfather*, and we obsessively watched (and quoted and analyzed and emulated) *The Sopranos*, and all along, Chase was out there watching us watching them. As the show became more popular, the characters more beloved, the fans more openly excited by the violence, one got the distinct sense that Chase did not always like what he saw.

... Over the course of the show, Tony’s sessions with Melfi have taken on many metaphors. They are like sessions with a hooker: She takes his money and plays a seductive role. (In one sequence, he dreams her office is a bordello.) They are like sessions with a priest: She hears confessions and guides him toward meaning. They are like sessions with the FBI: By talking to her, he’s betraying his family, putting his livelihood at risk, and violating *omertà*.

But most unsettlingly, they became a metaphor for our relationship, as viewers, with the show.

... the moment that really wrenched the show off its axis was a brief, almost throwaway scene in the third season, in an episode titled “Second Opinion.” I remember the first time I watched it, the way it seemed to invert everything that came before. Carmela goes to a psychiatrist we’ve never met before, a Dr. Krakower. She is eager to make the session a referendum on personal growth...

But Krakower cuts her off. With riveting bluntness, he addresses Carmela not as a seeker but as a sinner. She is not Tony’s wife, he informs her; she’s his accomplice...

... To me, Krakower is Chase, and we are Carmela. He told us who Tony is, and each episode, he became crueler in delivering that message. This shift narrowed Chase's artistic palette, cutting out the warmer shades of the early episodes. But it also lent the show an acid originality, a sadistic narrative engagement with the audience and our own corruption. (Nussbaum "The Long Con")

This playful, intermediary device immediately brought to mind the work of Bertolt Brecht, which aimed at fostering a dialectical mode of spectatorship by use of narrative-breaking theatrical techniques.

Before long, I found myself tracing earlier and earlier into the annals of popular criticism of *The Sopranos*. These passages—such as Nancy Franklin's "The Hit Man's Burden," Stephen Holden's "Sympathetic Brutes in a Pop Masterpiece," Vincent Canby's "From the Humble Mini-Series Comes the Magnificent Megamovie," Elaine Showalter's "Mob Scene," and Ellen Willis' "Our Mobsters, Ourselves"—all gravitate around the notion that TV had 'outdone itself' with *The Sopranos*, that this show had 'revolutionized' the medium by infusing it with the compositional techniques developed in art cinema, narrative sophistication formerly reserved for high literature, and intellectual (even philosophical) depth. All of these critical writings imply much about 'high' art, 'low' media, and mass culture, considerations of which explicitly invite 'postmodernism' into the conversation.

As I rounded out this survey of critical responses, I then turned to academic scholarship. In large part, the field consists of isolated essays from a number of scholarly journals or edited anthologies committed to the series. *The Sopranos and Philosophy: I Kill Therefore I Am* was published in 2001, after the third season—as were several books on the series. The next year, *A Sitdown with The Sopranos: Watching Italian American Culture on TV's Most Talked About Series* was released. The final three anthologies all have David Lavery as the sole or co-editor (a testament

to his role in the realm of *Sopranos* scholarship): *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos* published in 2001; *Reading The Sopranos* in 2005, after the fifth; and *The Essential Sopranos Reader* in the years following the conclusion of the series.

While several of these individual essays have helped my understanding of matters tremendously, I find myself generally frustrated with them more often than not. Too often, they simply copy rhetorical strategies borne out in critical discourse, purporting to add theoretical depth to those insights while actually burying them in a graveyard of deadened academic jargon. But the most glaring weakness in the field is a crime of negligence: whereas I had been so deeply taken, from the beginning of my own viewing of the series, with Tony's self-discoveries in therapy with Dr. Melfi, many other students of the show pay little attention to it. This reflects, in an odd way, one of the worst tendencies within that mass of *Sopranos* fans: those (mostly male) fans who make a habit of 'skipping the Melfi scenes.' (The exceptions to this generalization are Indeed, it had initially seemed obvious to me that Tony's therapy was a crucial device in structuring the spectator's expectations and experience of the show; perhaps, I now think, it is not so obvious.

I have been encouraged to pursue this topic as a thesis project, despite my disappointment with those initial essays I read, by a few exceptions to that general tendency: Jane Feuer's "Psychoanalytic Space in HBO Dramas," Fernando Canet's "More Therapy with Dr. Melfi," which was apparently conceived as an extension of Rob White's "No More Therapy," which all follow Nussbaum in conceiving the role of therapy on *The Sopranos* as a narrative device.

This courage has been further strengthened by pair of clever theses developed on the show. The first of these is Cara Weinberger's 2010 "Giving Up, Settling Down: *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos*, and Professional Class Marriage." In her work, she meditates at length on popular American TV shows' on-screen representations of middle-class domesticity. It begins with a remarkable chapter

analyzing the role of the family in the so-called ‘culture wars’ of late-twentieth America. (5-41)

This work stands out to me because it recalls and even makes reference to Lasch’s historical work on the American family, confirming for me that I am not myself paranoid in sensing that connection.

Whereas this first thesis is closer to mine in theory, the second is closer to mine in geography: Adam Brockman, a recent master’s student here at ISU—class of 2020—produced a thesis entitled “‘Don’t Stop Believin’ in a pair of socks: How *The Sopranos* shapes our understanding of mental illness.” His work also expands upon the ‘family themes’ in the show, most notably those characters who are “‘becoming’ their parents”: inheriting their depression, anxiety, and character disorders. It is richly informed by studies in our media culture.

A number of book-length academic publications have also been of primary interest and assistance to me. In 2001, Glen O. Gabbard—an accomplished psychoanalyst in the object-relations tradition who has elsewhere written much about the portrayals of psychiatry in cinema and popular culture—wrote *The Psychology of The Sopranos*, which is primarily an analysis of Tony Soprano’s character structure and encounter with psychotherapy. He also links specific plot points and themes to the body of Freudian thought that the show so obviously traffics in.

That same year, Maurice Yacowar—pivotal for bringing the disciplines of film and popular culture studies to Canada—published *The Sopranos on the Couch*. While the majority of the body text is dedicated to ‘recap’-ing each episode from the series’ first three seasons (analyses of which are quite insightful and useful), most importantly to me, he offers a pair of lucid critical essays at the beginning and end of the volume which almost exclusively locate and contextualize the series within postmodernism.

In 2008, Christopher J. Vincent released *Paying Respect to The Sopranos: A Psychosocial Analysis*, which largely ties up plot events and general themes under headings which relate them to Tony Soprano's "journey."

Finally, in 2009, Dana Polan published his book, *The Sopranos*. His volume is a must-read for any student of the series. It is divided into two sections: the first dedicated to a study of the formal characteristics of the show itself, as well as responses to the show; the second analyzing its properties as a commodity on the cultural exchange. In the first, he offers dashing insights into aesthetics and the ironies of 'interpretation' (even as he hazards his own interpretations of the show); in the second, he supplements it with speculations on the nature of media and the market. Polan, too, situates the show within postmodernism, but in a manner different from that of other commentators. Central to Polan's argument is the idea that the combination of the narrative openness of the series and its role as a commodity on the cultural exchange (that is open to expansion and revision, by industrial standards) means that audiences will continue to foster an active relationship with it. He also scores the field of academic writings on *The Sopranos* along the way (a critique which we shall address head-on). I owe much to Polan's work: his explication of the series' relationship with its spectators is central to my own understanding, and his critique of *Sopranos* scholarship has served as a corrective to other trends that I hope to avoid; my work, therefore, ought to be thought of as an extension of and response to Polan's.

It is probably a testament to Polan's triumph that no other full-length academic books have taken up *The Sopranos* as its article of research since his entry. In the last decade, critics and commercial vendors have claimed that ground, with quite a bit of success. In 2013, two books portrayed *The Sopranos* and its father, David Chase, as central figures in the "Third Golden Age" of American television: the first being Brett Martin's *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a*

*Creative Revolution*, and the second Alan Sepinwall's *The Revolution Was Televised: How The Sopranos, Mad Men, Breaking Bad, Lost, and Other Groundbreaking Dramas Changed TV Forever*. Martin's book, especially, has been of central use. It proves how *The Sopranos* was itself a product of many different cultural and industrial elements and very specific conditions. It also, like Sepinwall's book with it, demonstrates how the other "Third Golden Age" shows that followed in *The Sopranos*'s wake bore its ineradicable watermark, thus giving some additional credit to the notion that it 'revolutionized' the medium.

Finally, with the recent surge of interest in the show (located largely in Gen Z, as we shall see), a couple more books have entered the market. In 2019, Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall—two critics whose early writings on *The Sopranos* in the New Jersey Star-Ledger did much to raise it to critical and popular acclaim—published *The Sopranos Sessions*, a book which contains brilliant analyses of every episode in the show and a series of enlightening interviews with series creator David Chase.

A year later, in 2020, *Off the Back of a Truck: Unofficial Contraband for The Sopranos Fan* hit the shelves. It is an exclusively commercial volume comprised mainly of opinion pieces.

Lastly, former actors on the show Michael Imperioli and Steve Schirripa (Christopher Moltisanti and Bobby Bacalieri, respectively), after having made a podcast called *Talking Sopranos* at the beginning of the pandemic, decided to put the interviews they conducted with artists on the show together and publish them under the title *Woke Up This Morning: The Definitive Oral History of The Sopranos* in 2021.

## THESIS STATEMENT

Because of the scattered backdrop of scholarship in which I am working, the argument that I will advance shortly pulls from this field in the form of patchwork. I am immediately ready to face the concern that my own work will mirror the lack methodological coherence of the field as a whole.

In any case: the aims for this thesis are to further investigate the show's use of Tony's psychotherapy as a narrative device in building the relationship between the work of art and the spectator. This device, I argue, possesses a Brechtian character: it not only breaks up the narrative action, but it also comments upon it. Most importantly, this device grounds spectators in a psychoanalytic outlook which enables the spectator to analyze the show's central anti-hero, interpret the series of events around him, as well as the criticize the American climate he is a symbol for. I advance the thesis that *The Sopranos*, in setting up a Brechtian structure of spectatorship with its audience, raised psychoanalysis into a *public philosophy*.

I borrow the term 'public philosophy,' as well as the notion that psychoanalysis can act as one, from Christopher Lasch's lecture entitled "Melanie Klein, Psychoanalysis, and the Revival of Public Philosophy." He begins by defining public philosophy as "appealing to the public conscience and seeking to revive a lost tradition of civic discourse" (205)<sup>1</sup> before ultimately concluding:

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<sup>1</sup> Lasch himself borrowed the term, I believe, from the 1985 volume *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, composed by several sociologist and edited by the important American sociologist of religion Robert Bellah. Lasch was enthusiastic about this book: his glowing review of it appears on its back cover. It is another addition to a long tradition of speculations—of which Lasch is a part—about the American personality and American values, descending from Tocqueville. The authors describe their contribution to social science as public philosophy, which they too define as a means of popular, civic, democratic discourse. (297-307)

Psychoanalysis... can be understood not merely as a new science or as a critique of a repressive civilization but as a critique of human pretensions, which incorporates ancient cultural traditions and gives them a new basis in clinical observation. Considered from the last of these perspectives, it has much to contribute to a revival of public philosophy. Indeed it might serve as the very basis of such a philosophy, which has to rest on an acknowledgment of our dependent position in the world, of the limits of human knowledge, and on the need for others who nevertheless remain separate from ourselves. It is the discovery of human limits that creates the possibility of fraternity... (213)

In Chapter I, I address one of the dominant rhetorical tendencies in critical and scholarly writings on *The Sopranos*: the notion that it ‘revolutionized’ American television. While some assert *The Sopranos*’s superiority to earlier American television by reflexively comparing it or emphasizing its roots in ‘higher’ arts—literature and cinema, most often—I situate *The Sopranos* within a broader cultural and commercial history of American television itself, analyzing how it capitalized upon certain conditions in its own medium. The value of the ‘revolutionary’ thesis, I argue, is that it allows us to see how *The Sopranos* engendered an active, rather than passive, spectatorship.

In Chapter II, I analyze another general tendency in *Sopranos* commentary: to bring ‘postmodernism’ into conversation of the show. These writings can tell us much about the playful relationship between the show and its viewers, but they ultimately have little to say about what we want to know: how *The Sopranos* deals in social criticism.

In Chapter III, I venture a comparison between the aesthetics of *The Sopranos* and the work of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht’s “Epic theatre” provides, I believe, an optimal template for understanding some of the formal devices used in *The Sopranos* and how these strive to achieve a particular mode of spectatorship, described in Brecht’s work as the *Verfremdungseffekt*, and even a mode of social criticism. I then describe the use of psychotherapy scenes between protagonist



Tony Soprano and Dr. Jennifer Melfi as a narrative device which grounds viewers in a psychoanalytic outlook. This outlook allows them to analyze not only Tony, but Dr. Melfi too, and to see them as contrasting forces in American society.

In Chapter IV, I assess the overlap between *The Sopranos* and Christopher Lasch's social criticism. *The Sopranos* depicts a society in decline, with its infrastructure corroding, full of useless commodities, and peopled by deeply unhappy, disordered people. *The Sopranos* echoes Lasch in suggesting that the 'decline of the family' has to do with capitalism's invasion of it. This gives rise to a sense of non-responsibility, and ultimately, stasis.

## CHAPTER I: THE ‘REVOLUTIONARY’ THESIS IN *SOPRANOS* COMMENTARY

At their best, both the critics and the celebrants of TV argue on behalf of pleasure... indeed, there is such a thing as art even on TV, and for those rare exceptions we should be grateful. But it is not the purpose of the cultural critic to merely accentuate the positive, neglecting the inquiry into TV’s vast badness, and the reasons for it, which TV itself betrays.

—Mark Crispin Miller, *Boxed In: The Culture of TV* (24)

Pre-*Sopranos*, TV was widely dismissed as a medium for programs that didn’t ask the viewer to think about anything except what was coming on next, and that preferred lovable characters who didn’t change and had no inner life. The ideal network series was filler between commercials. It was hard to make art in this kind of environment, though some creators managed. There were lots and lots of rules. There were words you couldn’t say, things you couldn’t show, stories you couldn’t tell. The number one rule: don’t upset people.

—Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall, *The Sopranos Sessions* (6)

### **Abstract**

In this chapter, I address one of the dominant rhetorical tendencies in critical and scholarly writings on *The Sopranos*: the notion that it ‘revolutionized’ American television. While some assert *The Sopranos*’s superiority to earlier American television by reflexively comparing it or emphasizing its roots in ‘higher’ arts—literature and cinema, most often—I situate *The Sopranos* within a broader cultural and commercial history of American television itself, analyzing how it capitalized upon certain conditions in its own medium. The value of the ‘revolutionary’ thesis, I argue, is that it allows us to see how *The Sopranos* engendered an active, rather than passive, spectatorship.

A *New York Times* article from October of 2021 asks, “Why Is Every Young Person in America Watching ‘The Sopranos’?” That same month, *The Many Saints of Newark*, a film that

serves as a (sort-of) prequel to the events of the series, was released in theaters and on HBO Max. A few months later, in February of 2022, the advertising cycle attached to Super Bowl featured a commercial from GMC which mimicked the infamous opening credits of *The Sopranos* and used actors from the series itself. (Poniewozik “Nostalgia’s The Only Game”) And—most ironically, perhaps—that September, the Marvel television show *She-Hulk* apparently upset its own fanbase by ‘spoiling’ key moments in *The Sopranos* for them. [Freitag “Disney+ Subscribers Trash She-Hulk for Spoiling Major Sopranos Moments”]

There is no denying that *The Sopranos* has gained increased attention through the early part of this decade. But how should it be explained? Why should a television series that stopped airing over a decade and a half ago continue to capture so much public attention? What interest should people have in a story about a violent, corrupt, bigoted, and chronically depressed mob boss who seeks out psychotherapy?

One argument may be that *The Sopranos* still stands out as an object of mass culture for its ‘quality’: in other words, its remarkable acting performances; sophisticated compositional techniques; clever writing; interesting subject matter; capacity to reflect common experience.

This argument obviously suggests a superiority of *The Sopranos* to other objects of mass culture; especially to other products of American television. In a *Rolling Stone* article listing “The 100 Greatest TV Shows of All Time” (an article which, being the first item in a Google search of the subject, possesses at least an aura of being definitive) television critic Alan Sepinwall ranks the show above all others. Elsewhere, in a book about the recent history of the medium, he treats the show as a transitional figure into a new era of American television. (*The Revolution was Televised*) Brett Martin, another historian of this ‘revolution,’ also places *The Sopranos* center stage in his own study of the “Third Golden Age” in American television. (*Difficult Men*)

Any suggestion that *The Sopranos* ‘revolutionized’ American television wouldn’t be worth much if it couldn’t be demonstrated how American television were any different after it. The vast majority of the central shows of this “Third Golden Age” explicitly echo the themes and the narrative plotlines, of *The Sopranos*. *Six Feet Under* (HBO 2001-2005) follows it in its interest in the intersection between the American family, the American way of life, and “the American way of death.”<sup>2</sup> *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008) shares with it a common grounding in regionalism (an important tradition in American literature)—*The Sopranos* with Newark, *The Wire* with Baltimore—and also its sense of the decay of the American experiment (embodied in the death of the city). *The Shield* (FX 2002-2008) is similarly led by a morally ambiguous ‘anti-hero’ protagonist, balding and brawny, forced to be one man with his family and another entirely in his violent, corrupt work. *Mad Men* (AMC 2007-2015) also senses and posits a link between industry, the subordination of women, the market, and the decline of older value systems. Above all the rest, *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008-2013) carries the *Sopranos* stamp. *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan and lead actor, Bryan Cranston (Walter White) have both publicly acknowledged their debt to *The Sopranos*. ‘Debt’ hangs over *Breaking Bad*; that series, too, centers a man with an alter ego torn between his family and his criminal work (into which he is driven by the medical costs engendered by a cancer diagnosis.) And it, too, features another balding and brawny man suffering from panic attacks.

The ‘revolutionary’ thesis posits above all that American television after *The Sopranos* is different—and better—than American television before it. To the casual observer, this much is self-evident: these newer shows are often simply described as more fun or exciting to watch, more sophisticated in their technical or narrative composition. But these historians of the “Third Golden

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<sup>2</sup> The title of Jessica Mitford’s book that was incredibly influential for series creator Alan Ball. (Martin 98)

Age” do not stop at arguing that *The Sopranos* and the shows that follow in its stead are of a higher aesthetic quality than earlier television (though they well may be). Moreover, they argue that *The Sopranos* also provided for later TV artists and producers a model for infusing so-called ‘quality’ TV with social criticism, focused around a set of clearly definable themes of American life: corruption, work, family, love, loss, decay.

The difference between the ‘new’ and ‘old’ American television bears some relation to structural changes in the industrial and commercial fabric of the medium itself, in other words. For not only did these “Third Golden Age” shows mirror *The Sopranos* in narrative, thematic, and even critical matters; they also followed its industrial and commercial aspect. It is no coincidence that most of them appeared on cable—an unforeseen development in the market that *The Sopranos* itself helped along—or that they too took up the one-hour, thirteen-episode format like *The Sopranos*.

For Brett Martin, this format and its social criticism are part and parcel with one another:

TV has always been reflexively compared with film, but this form of ongoing, open-ended storytelling was, as an oft-used comparison had it, closer to another explosion of high art in a vulgar pop medium: the Victorian serialized novel. That revolution also had been facilitated by upheavals in how stories were created, produced, distributed, and consumed: higher literacy, cheaper printing methods, the rise of a consumer class. Like the new TV, the best of the serials—by Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot—created suspense through expansive characterization rather than mere cliff-hangers. And like it, too, the new literary form invested in the writer both enormous power (since he or she alone could deliver the coal to keep the narrative train running) and enormous pressure...

Moreover, like the Victorian serialists, the creators of this new television found that the inherent features of their form—a vast canvas, intertwining story lines, twists and turns and backtracks in characters’ progress—happened to be singularly equipped not only to fulfill commercial demands, but also to address the big issues of a decadent empire: violence, sexuality, addiction, family, class. These issues became the defining tropes of cable drama. And just like the Victorian writers, TV’s auteurs embraced the irony of critiquing a society overwhelmed by industrial consumerism by using precisely that society’s most industrialized, consumerist media invention. In many ways, this was TV about what TV had wrought. (7)

All put together, the ‘revolutionary’ thesis contends that *The Sopranos* laid a new template for those working and generating profit within American TV. A couple of things remain ambiguous: what is the basis for suggesting the aesthetic superiority of *The Sopranos* to earlier American television? How might it be explained? And how do these shows bridge the gap from ‘good art’ to social criticism?

The ‘revolutionary’ thesis accepts as already given much of what was said about the show by other critics and journalists when it first appeared on the American scene (even if those early commentators could hardly have predicted what the future of American television would be after *The Sopranos*). Indeed, when it hit the air in 1999, *The Sopranos* was instantly noted for standing in stark contrast from the rest of American television—and above it, too. Stephen Holden, in an early piece for the *New York Times*, infamously called it the “greatest work of American popular culture in the last quarter century.” (“Sympathetic Brutes in a Pop Masterpiece”) At the series’ end, David Remnick would recall it as “the richest achievement in the history of television.” (“Family Guy”) Maurice Yacowar put it more specifically when he praised it as “an oasis of reflective, deeply moving popular fiction in the desert of consumerist fantasy.” (15)

Such critical responses obviously said more about the backdrop of American television from which *The Sopranos* emerged as they did about the show itself. At the end of the twentieth century, it was a laughable proposal that a television show could cause serious thinkers to take an interest; nor did many intellectuals devote much energy to the question of whether a television show should give more modest individuals reason to think seriously either.

For those who were concerned with the quality of public art, the first of American television's vices was that it left little room for art in the first place: too much space was occupied by advertising. Thus well-known TV and film critic Vincent Canby thought it relevant to add in his review of the first season of *The Sopranos*:

Though the networks still dominate the television market, their audiences are dwindling. More and more people are apparently realizing that so-called free television demands too high a price: that we surrender an ever-increasing proportion of our attention to the contemplation of commercials. Since the rules were changed during the Reagan years, broadcasters can stuff any program with as many commercials as they can get away with.

... In our society we celebrate advertising as an art form, which it may be. Advertising also helps to keep the economy going. Yet no child grows up today without being aware of the gulf between the real world and the world as seen in television commercials... ("From the Humble Mini-Series")

Another of American television's crimes—and arguably more troubling than the first—was that the programming itself was hardly more interesting than the stream of commercials it occasionally interrupted: dramaturgically predictable, visually bland. The governing principle (and running joke) for the titular laborers in the so-called “writer’s medium” was that their work was to be inoffensive and, as *Sopranos* creator David Chase put it, that it had to “tell [the audience] what they’re about to see; show it to them; tell them what they just saw.” (Bogdanovich interview) And what those audiences saw was often quite boring: as Martin recalls, technological limitations—“clunky, immovable cameras and limited recording capacity”—most often meant repetitive framing techniques and static visuals; “establishing shot, close-up, close-up, establishing shot, close-up, close-up, camera always on whoever was speaking, everything flooded with light...” (20, 15) No wonder why most parodies of TV centered upon the irony that no one actually watched it very closely: it’s background noise, after all, for those bodies populating spiritless suburban

domiciles; an electronic cube “usually somewhere in view, and never out of earshot,” as Mark Crispin Miller once conjectured. (7)

Contrary to an old McLuhanite canard, those who have grown up watching television are not, because of all that gaping, now automatically adept at visual interpretation. That spectatorial “experience” is passive, mesmeric, indiscriminating, and therefore not conducive to the refinement of the critical faculties: logic and imagination, linguistic precision, historical awareness, and a capacity for long, intense absorption. These... are the true desiderata of any higher education... (Miller 6)

Left-wing, Frankfurt School-inflected criticism of the medium added to these insights an insistence that network programming was little more than an extension of the same ideology (and economic objectives) that governed those ads. Morning and weekend cartoons kept children childish—and MTV would help them remain children even as they aged; soap operas and sitcoms during the day provided retirees and lonely housewives white noise while they focused their immediate attentions on other chores and hobbies; police procedurals and other heroic tales in the evenings fulfilled fantasies of potency that working men so desperately lacked in their own work. “Images of luxury, romance, and excitement dominate such programs, as they dominate the commercials that surround and engulf them,” one such critic, Christopher Lasch, bemoaned. (*The True and Only Heaven* 520) Orwellian images of organized domination, propaganda, and conformity were riddled throughout this indictment: on their view, individual advertisements sell specific goods and services, but television, taken as a whole, sells a dream—however thoughtless it may be. Miller railed: “TV itself [has become] a perfect shelter, a dream container, unbreakable, antiseptic, and without surprises.” (10)

This indictment turned out to be the mirror image, ironically, of another critique of television, loosely associated with the rise of the religious right, in which the medium’s cardinal sin was its promotion of an ethic of hedonism. Both accused TV of being a distraction, but in the



left-liberal view, TV distracted people from society's real issues, not from the richer joys of duty to God and nation, as the religious right had it. The religious right's critique bore another faint resemblance to a third, humanist strand of distaste towards the medium. The difference between the humanist critique and the religious right's was that the former lamented art's fall from the graces of the great works of the canon of Western civilization into fodder for the masses; the latter, on the other hand, argued that TV aided in America's fall from a sense of Godly purpose.

While these distinctive concerns came from different quarters of society, underneath they were all structurally alike. They all, for example, shared the central concern that TV was eroding mental life:

The criticism... has always transcended mere snobbery and included something more primitive and superstitious—as though these boxes of pulsing light and sound had dropped out of the sky into our pristine forest clearing. The exposure to artificial light, it's been said, inhibits cognitive development; the flickering images replicate hypnotism. Television has been accused of being addictive, corrupting, responsible for driving otherwise perfect, well-behaved children to violence and depravity.

Which is to say that TV's crimes have never been merely aesthetic, but moral, even metaphysical... The rhetoric could become nothing short of apocalyptic[.]” (Martin 22-23)

All these positions—whether they emanated from the left or the right—shared, in other words, a commitment to ‘serious,’ so-called ‘high’ art and culture. Television criticism has always trafficked in the typology of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art and culture, to be sure, having always been haunted by the specter of the ‘higher’ arts: the written word, the stage drama, the cinema. These, we are told, correspond with the ‘highest’ of psychic activities: worship, wonder, imagination, and interpretation. Television, on the other hand, is of a ‘lower’ aesthetic character in comparison to its competitors and is aligned with ‘lower’ human drives: slouching, grazing upon junk food to

satisfy oral cravings, and gazing upon junk that acts as wish fulfillments for other sorts of cravings—sex, drugs, and violence.

Recent decades have (thankfully) seen a growing disenchantment with this ‘high’/‘low’ binary in the arts and cultural criticism—brought on, in many ways, by the introduction of the rubric of ‘postmodernism’ into popular culture discourse at the end of the twentieth century which helped to make a TV show like *The Sopranos* accessible to serious discourse. Nevertheless, as a part of the larger field of television criticism, the majority of critical writings on *The Sopranos* tend to subtly reproduce those older arguments about ‘high’ and ‘low’ art and culture. In this drama, *The Sopranos* enters upon a barren stage, a shining star which puts its fellow thespians to shame.

Dana Polan has pointed out that many critics and scholars have impulsively appraised *The Sopranos* in comparison to those ‘higher’ arts of literature and cinema, rather than in comparison to cultural objects from its own medium. (86-104) Maurice Yacowar typifies this sort of rhetoric. In his book that sets out to “‘read’ each episode of *The Sopranos* across its first three seasons,” he reminds us that, on average, “television remains a primarily aural medium”—spectators “*hear* more than [they] *watch*”—but that “more often with [*The Sopranos*], however, the performances, camera work, and Bada Bing dancers compel us to watch.” (13) Shortly thereafter, he reminds us also that the serial format of *The Sopranos* aligns it closer to the work of Charles Dickens than to other television shows: “Remember: Dickens published his massive sagas in periodic installments, too, just like our weekly television series. *The Sopranos*’s 13-episode season allows for plausible inconsistencies and psychological twists that a shorter drama has no time for and that the sitcom’s need for reassuring familiarity precludes.” (13)

We are then reminded that the creator of *The Sopranos* himself resents television. (“I considered TV to be propaganda for the corporate state... I’m not a Marxist and I never was very radical, but that’s what I considered it to be. To some extent, I still do...” [Lavery and Thompson “David Chase, *The Sopranos*, and Television Creativity”]) It is important that he praises mid-twentieth century auteur cinema, after all, because the arresting images, framing techniques, camera movements, and formal playfulness between the visual and aural dimensions in *The Sopranos* all obviously recall Fellini much quicker than *The Brady Bunch*.

It is tempting—given the dominance of this sort of commentary surrounding *The Sopranos*—to accept an ‘auteur’ explanation of its ‘revolutionary’ quality. Yet it is important to place *The Sopranos* in context of other cultural and commercial changes over which any one person, such as David Chase, had little control. This is certainly not to say that Chase and the other creators of *The Sopranos* did not capitalize upon those conditions in their own way. (In fact, I hope to shed some light on just that.) But auteur theory tends to obscure just such conditions, treating the director as if he works in a vacuum. (Auteur theory does also generally assume that the director is, in fact, a ‘he.’ [Kael “Circles and Squares”])

It also tends to obliterate the productive and creative contributions of many other artists. Vincent Canby—without, it seems, a hint of irony—calls Chase an ‘auteur’ even while providing evidence that would suggest the term’s inapplicability:

The manner in which "The Sopranos" came together sounds initially less like Truffaut's now-classical auteurism than the old days at MGM or Warner Brothers or 20th Century Fox. This would cover the Hollywood studio system from the 1930's into the 1950's...

No less than 11 directors receive credit for "The Sopranos" (two of whom each directed two segments), as well as eight writers (who sometimes wrote alone, sometimes in pairs or in threes) and two different directors of photography. (“From the Humble Mini-Series”)

It is because the production of *The Sopranos* was a collective effort between Chase and a wide team of executives, writers, directors, actors, designers, artisans, and laborers that Robin Nelson has taken issue with the “Author(iz)ing” of David Chase. Nelson’s main argument is that Chase himself, HBO’s marketing, and the *Sopranos* fanbase—“and, as it appeared at the Sopranos Wake conference, many academics too”—have conceptualized Chase as an auteur as an extension of the tendency to treat *The Sopranos* as cinema and not as television. (41) In her view, Chase’s accomplishments should be celebrated in a way that does not evade the medium that they were borne out through. Chase should instead be thought of as “an executive producer who also writes and directs,” not the other way around; someone who organized the creative powers of many different producers, writers, directors, artisans, and actors to “sustain a consistency of tone and an overarching vision in a long-running, postmodern, hybrid television series produced under industrial television circumstances.” (50, 52)

To be sure, Chase did maintain an unprecedented amount of direct control over the productive and creative character of *The Sopranos*. No discussion about the show which left him out could carry on with much depth for very long. But if we are to understand what made *The Sopranos* unique in its own time, neither can we afford to lose sight of the material conditions which made space for such a ‘revolutionary’ television show. The ‘revolution’ in television that *The Sopranos* helped pioneer, in other words, should be taken to refer not merely to the quality of the individual commodities that the television industry creates and circulates, but also as a general product of the fundamental shifts in the material landscape of that industry in its entirety.

This is, ultimately, to assert the importance of the new cable model of television that *The Sopranos* helped legitimate. It was the massive success of *The Sopranos* that helped to prove to

the rest of the cable industry what massive profits lay in investment in original programming, propelling HBO to new heights in its market, raking in millions upon millions in revenue from new subscriptions. (Edgerton “*The Sopranos* as Tipping Point in the Second Coming of HBO” Levinson “Naked Bodies, Three Showings a Week, And No Commercials: *The Sopranos* as a Nuts-and-Bolts Triumph of Non-Network TV”; Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves “*The Sopranos* as HBO Brand Equity: The Art of Commerce in the Age of Digital Reproduction”)

From its roots in the seventies, HBO’s cable model was based off a base of consumers with subscriptions, not lucrative deals with advertisers. HBO first made its name—Home Box Office—by re-running movies throughout the day. These select movies were able to run without commercial interruption due to their commercial model and freedom from advertisers. (Martin 47-58) Later, in the nineties, when it began investing in original television programming (with *Oz* even before *The Sopranos*), this absence of commercials served HBO an unpremeditated advantage: the writers and showrunners of these new television series were liberated from the obligation of writing around commercial breaks. A new serialized televisual narrative format emerged: the individual season comprised of approximately 12-13 hour-long installments which helped distinguish *The Sopranos* from the network structure of 20-25 half-hour episodes. This format, it will be remembered, is what gave *The Sopranos* such a ‘Dickensian’ quality.

HBO did in fact invest an unprecedented amount of resources in *The Sopranos*, even before it was a proven product: Vincent Canby pointed out that the first season of *The Sopranos* “was budgeted to come in at \$1.9 million to \$2 million per episode, which would have made the total cost in the neighborhood of \$26 million.” This was “small change by standards in Hollywood, where \$26 million is not an outrageous budget for a comparatively plain, contemporary two-hour movie,” but it grossly outpaced the standards of network programming. (Canby “From the Humble

Miniseries”) It was precisely this substantial budget that allowed for many of the features that aesthetically distinguished *The Sopranos* from network programs: a larger pool of artisans to produce the materials needed for the show; improved technical equipment; an expanded arsenal of shooting locations; even the innovative use of music on *The Sopranos* can be traced to the substantial budget purposed for obtaining the rights for source materials. (Martin 3-4, 154-170; Bogdanovich interview). In short, it was this set of material conditions and technical capacities that went along with it that proved conducive to the ‘cinematic’ aesthetic character of *The Sopranos*.

The environment in which its creators worked provided not only an optimal biome for the fullest flowering of *The Sopranos*’ aesthetic capacities, but also a very specific audience—the ‘quality’ demographic, comprised of urbane, culturally literate, often liberal, upper-middle-class subscribers—who were prepared (and thirsty, perhaps) for more provocative material. This includes the obvious items—the gratuitous nudity, profanity, and violence the show put on the screen each week.

But we should also, I think, factor the show’s (often dark) thematic meditations into this equation too. Since the beginning, interpreters of *The Sopranos* have pointed at a number of ‘serious’ themes in American life that found expression in the show: strained relations between men and women in a post-feminist paradigm; industry and domination in a withering patriarchy; labor and family both strained by the needs of a transnational market; nationality and identity in a global age; time and place in a country founded on an escape from the bonds of the past; life and death in a society increasingly without a future; good and evil in a culture increasingly unwilling to draw a line between right and wrong.

Such provocative content and ideas as seen on and explored by *The Sopranos* is another important characteristic distinguishing it from the niceties (or banalities) of earlier network television. Nancy Franklin said of it early on that “There has certainly never been anything like it on TV, and on network TV there never *could* be anything like it—it goes out on a limb that doesn’t even exist at the networks. (“The Hit Man’s Burden”) And Dan Bischoff (formerly of the New Jersey Star-Ledger, alongside Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall) wrote in his 2014 biography of James Gandolfini, “*The Sopranos* [has] in embedded in it a critique, or maybe a parody, of the way reality is depicted by TV. David Chase [takes] delight in in mocking the established conventions of dramatic closure and edifying moral lesson that TV [has] always peddled.” (132)

The point is not that *The Sopranos* was this first TV show to do any of these things. Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall have stated the ‘revolutionary’ thesis, I think, in the best possible terms here:

*The Sopranos* wasn’t the first show to break most of these rules: *All in the Family* gave us a bigoted (though not irredeemable) main character; *Hill Street Blues* pushed drama into more serialized, morally gray territory; *Miami Vice* belied the notion that TV shows couldn’t look as good as movies. Nor was *The Sopranos* the first show to act like the rules didn’t exist; see, among others, *The Prisoner*, *Twin Peaks*, and HBO’s first original drama, *Oz*...

But it was the first show to do that and still become a massive, enduring hit.

Not since *I Love Lucy* had a show been copied as often and thoroughly, to the point where 2019 TV barely resembles the one into which Tony Soprano’s SUV rumbled back in 1999. All the aspects of the series that once startled viewers have become accepted: serialization; narrative and moral ambiguity; anti-heroes or villains as main characters; beauty for its own sake. That drama you just binged-watched on Netflix owes more to *The Sopranos* than to the rest of TV combined. The cell phones and references date the show to the turn of the millennium, but it still feels powerfully connected to what’s happening now... (6-7)

There is no doubt: things had changed in the medium, and for good, because of *The Sopranos*. The TV in the living room traveled the incredible distance from standing as a generalized symbol for mindless consumerism and suburban anomie (dominant themes in the anthology of the nightmare of the American Dream) to operating as a serious medium for legitimate art, and even social criticism.

The ‘revolutionary’ thesis provides the most useful starting point for any student of the series. But what it is missing, however, is a careful consideration or theory of spectatorship. *The Sopranos* was so different from the TV before it, it seems obvious to me, because it set stronger demands on the viewer. But how exactly did it do so? And in what way do its formal qualities lead to social criticism? The ‘revolutionary’ thesis helps identify the importance and value of *The Sopranos* as a piece of popular (mass) culture. It raises questions, however, that it cannot answer alone:

The implication has always been that at last, TV was playing way out of its league.

But HBO’s slogan aside, *The Sopranos* was TV—and great because of that fact, not despite it. Chase was the first TV creator to truly take advantage, in every sense, of the odd bond a series has with its audience: an intimate dynamic that builds over time, like any therapeutic relationship... It is a collaboration, with viewer response providing a crucial feedback loop—a fitting dynamic for a mob story, a genre predicated on a certain level of bloodlust in its audience. For eight years, the characters themselves obsessively watched (and quoted and analyzed and emulated) *GoodFellas* and *The Godfather*, and we obsessively watched (and quoted and analyzed and emulated) *The Sopranos*, and all along, Chase was out there watching us watching them. As the show became more popular, the characters more beloved, the fans more openly excited by the violence, one got the distinct sense that Chase did not always like what he saw. (Nussbaum “The Long Con”)



## CHAPTER II: 'POSTMODERNISM' IN *SOPRANOS* COMMENTARY

"[*The Sopranos*] is high art and low art, vulgar and sophisticated. It mixes disreputable spectacle (casual nudity, gory executions, drugs, profanity, and retrograde sentiments) with flourishes from postmodern novels, dialectical theater, and mid-century European art-house cinema."

—Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall, *The Sopranos Sessions* (11)

### **Abstract**

In this chapter, I analyze another general tendency in *Sopranos* commentary: to bring 'postmodernism' into conversation of the show. These writings can tell us much about the playful relationship between the show and its viewers, but they ultimately have little to say about what we want to know: how *The Sopranos* deals in social criticism.

The 'revolutionary' thesis in *Sopranos* commentary, as we have seen, bears some debt to the 'high'/'low' binary. The implication exists that *The Sopranos* 'revolutionized' the medium by importing the narrative compositional techniques of 'high' literature and the visual sensibilities of 'art' cinema into the 'low' medium of television.

It is tempting to take this convergence of 'high' and 'low' as the basis of a description of the 'postmodern' character of *The Sopranos*. In fact, the tendency to resort to 'postmodernism' in *Sopranos* commentary is almost as common as the tendency to imply that the show 'revolutionized' the medium, with or without any reference to 'high' or 'low' art. But the term is

used in many different ways in *Sopranos* commentary, due to the plastic character of the term itself.

The debate over postmodernism is deeply interdisciplinary, converging across different areas of study. In the arts, it catalogues a changing set of aesthetic trends and styles; in philosophy, it contemplates the implosion of the Enlightenment and the collapse of absolute truth; and in history and sociology, it refers to a new array of economic conditions and social organization.

Most of the time in writings on *The Sopranos*, the term is used to indicate the amount of ‘intertextual’ ‘references’ to other cultural objects. “From postmodernism,” Yacowar informs us, *The Sopranos* “drew its confidence that an audience will delight in irony, look for how this art draws from other art, and exult in transcending borders and conventions.” (16) Many *Sopranos* scholars are awed by the sheer volume of references in the show; all the Lavery-edited anthologies, for example, contain an appendix simply cataloguing these.

These references can serve many purposes that add depth to the viewing experience. Sometimes, they can add to the emotional register of a scene, such as Robert Frost’s “Stop By Woods on a Snowy Night” from Anthony Jr.’s class readings right after his grandmother, Livia Soprano, has died, or later on William Butler Yeats’s “The Second Coming” from his college readings as he contemplates suicide. (“Proshai, Livushka” 3.2; “The Second Coming” 7.7) Other times, they may be purely ironic, such as the appearance of a “trick painting” in Dr. Melfi’s office (that Tony Soprano amusingly calls a “corschach test”), or Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd*, which Carmela Soprano refuses to acknowledge carries homoerotic undertones. (“Denial, Anger, Acceptance” 1.3; “Eloise” 4.12) In the character of Carmela, too, they function to bottle up and remind the viewer of central leitmotifs: in her case, her feeling of being trapped in her unhappy marriage and yearning for an escape, as when she weeps at Jusepe de Ribera’s painting *The Holy*

*Family with Saints Ann and Catherine of Alexandria*, or when she studies *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* with Dr. Wegler, the only male lover we see her take during her separation from Tony. (“Amour Fou” 3.12; “Sentimental Education” 5.6)

Most of the ‘intertextual’ references in *The Sopranos* are to other movies and TV shows, which serve to signify the show’s ironic self-awareness of its position in longer lineages of generic traditions. *The Sopranos* is deeply mired in two main genres: the family drama and the mafia genre.

Series creator David Chase himself has routinely indicated that he first thought of *The Sopranos* as a family show. (Bogdanovich interview, Fresh Air interview [2000]. It is also telling that, elsewhere, he has noted Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams as writing inspirations—those beloved dramatists of the *sturm und drang* of American familial strife.) Moments within the Soprano McMansion mimic (or mock) the domesticity one would expect to see in a ‘family values’ show like *Leave it to Beaver* or *The Brady Bunch*; a working-class sitcom like *The Honeymooners* or *All in the Family*; or even an adult cartoon show like *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy*. Direct references to other products of the family drama often provide moments for comedy, as in Tony’s quoting of *Father Knows Best* or Tony Blundetto’s imitations of Jackie Gleason. (Polan 105-112; “University” 3.6; “Rat Pack” 5.2; “Test Dream” 5.11) Perhaps, too, *The Sopranos* could be read as something akin to a comedy of manners in the tradition of *Tartuffe*, *The Country Wife*, or *The School for Scandal*, making a mockery of wealthy and powerful families for their bourgeois pretenses. Ellen Willis picks up this thread: “...the underlying themes evoke George Eliot: the world of Tony Soprano is a kind of postmodern *Middlemarch*...” (“Our Mobsters, Ourselves”)

Yacowar reminds us that *The Sopranos* playfully interacts with a long tradition of the mafia genre by pointing out that “the series’ basic pun is the title... Sopranos ‘sing’—which is also the argot for ratting to the feds/cops...” “From the American gangster films of the 1930s it drew the

dynamic of gunfire, sexy music, and clubs, and the theme/value of individualism rampant against urban conformism. The hero climbs from the gutter to the top—and is brought down.” (16) One such film, William Wellman’s 1931 *The Public Enemy*, practically narrates “Proshai, Livushka.” (3.2) Scenes from that film reproduced within the episode itself comment back on two different storylines: the first, the death of Tony Soprano’s mother; and the other, his rising conflict with his daughter, Meadow, who has brought home a black Jewish boyfriend:

For Noah, in this film “Cagney is modernity”—and Tony personifies archaic racism. But Noah seems naïve in his zeal for the college film course titled “Images of Hyper-Capitalist Self-Advancement in the Era of the Studio System.” For that theme applies equally to the post-studio system, to *The Sopranos* as a mass media entertainment like the old genre films, and to both Noah’s father’s and Tony’s jobs. Like so much academia (and books analyzing American TV series), the pompous academic overstates the obvious. If *Public Enemy* is “modernity,” *The Sopranos* is postmodern in its shifting viewpoints, non-linear narrative, cultural allusiveness, and reflecting back on itself. (Yacowar 131)

Francis Ford Coppola’s *Godfather* trilogy (1972-1990) looms large over the Soprano crew, as well. *Sopranos* characters constantly quote *The Godfather* series; debate whether “I or II was better” or if III was “misunderstood”; and ask each other what their favorite scenes are. (“I can’t have this conversation again,” Tony Soprano groans in reply. [“Pilot” 1.1; “A Hit is a Hit” 1.10; “Commendatori” 2.4]) Elaine Showalter takes a particular interest in this relationship: “In its representation of Mafia family life as a microcosm of contemporary American society, *The Sopranos* most obviously echoes Mario Puzo’s 1969 best-seller *The Godfather* and the three *Godfather* films of Francis Ford Coppola. One of the postmodern pleasures of the series is the mobsters’ fascination with these antecedents.” (“Mob Scene”) Beyond that, *The Sopranos* shares an astounding 27 actors in common with Martin Scorsese’s 1990 genre-redefining *Goodfellas*—which Chase has called his “Koran” (Bogdanovich interview)—several of whom play central characters: Michael Imperioli, for example, the *Goodfellas* nobody who gets shot in

the foot by Joe Pesci's Tommy, becomes Christopher Moltisanti in *The Sopranos*, who himself shoots a nobody in the foot. ("Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti" 1.8) Chris Moltisanti becomes a bit of a vehicle for postmodernism across the entirety of *The Sopranos* from beginning to end; he aspires to be a writer for TV and movies, which allows endless opportunities for references to other articles of mass culture and for general allusions to the very industry which *The Sopranos* is involved in. It is granted an extra layer of irony that actor Michael Imperioli occasionally functioned as a writer on *The Sopranos* itself. Near the end of the series, when Chris dies in a car wreck, he is listening to the soundtrack for Scorsese's then-recent 2006 *The Departed*: he enters the show through a Scorsese reference, and exits through one. To add to the matter, *The Sopranos* represented the sixth time in the 1990s that a mob boss went into therapy in a film or television show, including *Analyze This!*, another story in which "the don" is driven into talk therapy by panic attacks. (Gabbard 9) Ellen Willis has seized upon the cosmic irony of this: "it's more than a little interesting that *The Sopranos* and *Analyze This!* plucked the gangster-sees-therapist plot from the cultural unconscious at more or less the same time and apparently by coincidence." (Willis "Our Mobsters, Ourselves") *The Sopranos* chose to signal its own awareness of this coincidence as soon as it possibly could: in the opening episode of the second season, when Tony is attempting to begin a psychotherapeutic relationship, the male shrink tells him: "I've seen *Analyze This*." "Analyze This?" Tony responds: "It's a freaking comedy!"

The study of these references help describe—but do not fully explain—the playful relationship between *The Sopranos* and its audiences. Along with the 'literary' narrative sophistication of the show and its 'cinematic' visuals, these references invite audiences to pay close attention and to draw connections and associations from what they are seeing; but the rubric of postmodernism does not, in itself, involve a theory of spectatorship, nor a framework by which

to understand *The Sopranos*'s distinctive mode of social criticism, both of which we are still in need of.

Dana Polan's work on *The Sopranos* moves us closer to the point. He too analyzes that playful relationship between the show and its audiences using a postmodernist framework, but his work does not involve much discussion of these intertextual references. He begins his study of the relationship between *The Sopranos* and its viewers by studying public responses to its ending, that infamously provided an anti-conclusion to the narrative by abruptly cutting to ten seconds of a black screen with no sound before credits finally rolled:

In the days immediately following June 10, 2007, the date on which the last episode of HBO's hit show *The Sopranos* was aired, the word "Sopranos" itself was the most frequent search term on Internet search engines. And in the first few minutes after the episode finished, the HBO Web site crashed and remained down for several hours due to the volume of people trying to log into it. There are several lessons to be drawn from this. One is about the increased role of new media—such as the Web—[aids] in extending and amplifying the life cycle of any particular cultural product, of which this television series is an example. Even as it finished out its first run on HBO, the Sopranos phenomenon would spill beyond the discrete object that was the show itself and find additional vitality in multiple sites of media and of everyday culture... *The Sopranos* came to be appropriated and reappropriated to diverse ends in the larger context of media entertainment and salesmanship. This increasingly can be the fate of any cultural work today: its meanings and its effects go beyond its initial manifestation to be reworked and repurposed for new audiences and new profit elsewhere in the social landscape. (Polan 1)

After the immediate panic, and now in the longer run, responses to this non-ending have been dominated by competing 'interpretations' of what 'happened' in the narrative universe of *The Sopranos* after the cut-to-black.<sup>3</sup> One camp assumes that Tony is 'whacked' at the diner, because of a convergence of several different death symbols in the final episode. Formally, too, the

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<sup>3</sup> A useful summary and argument of all of these interpretations can be found in the recent podcast series, "With Pulp," created by an anonymous individual who has adopted the online alias of "Crado Sprano," clearly a play on the character Corrado Soprano, or Uncle Junior, on the series.

darkness and silence mirrored something said by character Bobby Baccalieri to Tony in the opening episode of that final season about death: “You probably don’t even hear it when it happens, right?” (“Sopranos Home Movies” 7.1. This sound bite is played at the conclusion of the series’ penultimate episode, “The Blue Comet” [7.8]—named as such after Bobby’s own death—making it automatically interpretable as a symbol or harbinger of death.) Others insist that death is not the only possible conclusion for Tony. Perhaps Tony is finally brought in by the FBI, after years of a building RICO case against him. A more depressing interpretation ventures that nothing happens or changes at all; the Soprano family continues their never-ending cycle of sin, guilt, repentance, then backsliding straight into their old ways. (“It just goes on, and on, and on, and on...”)

“Each of these might have closed the narrative,” Polan notes, “but their sheer multiplicity and diversity suggests that none necessarily was the dramatically logical ending, the one that structurally would close the show in a way that seemed rightly meaningful and would cast its significance over all that had come before.” (20)

The act of interpretation demonstrated here represents an effort of spectators to participate in the construction of the narrative. This is what defines Polan’s understanding of *The Sopranos* as postmodernist: the fact that many viewers have been able to fashion the show to whatever they desire to see in it. (Polan 1-16)

In his view, this is due to the marriage of two characteristics of *The Sopranos*: its existence as a commodity in a global, digital market and its narrative openness.

There could be no satisfaction in any ending to the fictional story. Instead of choosing, then, a narrative ending, ironic or not, the creators behind *The Sopranos* opted, instead, for a greater irony: admitting that the show was just a constructed bit of entertainment and not giving in to the audience’s desire to imagine that its fictions could have a real life closure to them. The abrupt cut to black that looked like the TiVo timer running out before the show ended was a reminder that the show, finally, was just a show. And the refusal to satisfy

the viewer's easy expectations was in keeping with the overall trajectory of *The Sopranos* across its seasons... To the end, the show kept one guessing. (Polan 7)

Polan's work, in my view, offers a useful supplement to the 'revolutionary' thesis: his is an analysis that allows us to better understand how *The Sopranos* itself invites very close watching, and even active participation in the world of the story. This, above all, is what contrasts *The Sopranos* from the television before it: that it encourages an active, rather than passive, spectatorship.

Polan's work loses its grounding, however, when he exchanges his interest in these matters for his scornful dismissal of 'moralizing' interpretations of the show, complaining that critics and scholars who are seeking to "legitimate serious scholarly attention to the series" by "attribut[ing] a sort of ethical uplift to it" are simply 'repeating' what the series itself 'says' about this or that social issue. (113-115)<sup>4</sup> In a few short pages, Polan radically shifts his argument, now arguing that the show itself actually has little to 'say' at all. Polan sees the show as recreating ethical and political tensions in American society (often rather explicitly through debate scenes in the kitchen, in the back office of the Bada Bing, or tellingly, in front of the TV) but ultimately positing no conclusive statement about them. (114)

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<sup>4</sup> Polan takes Merri Lisa Johnson's essay "Gangster Feminism: The Feminist Cultural Work of HBO's 'The Sopranos'" as exemplary of these flaws. Johnson describes her own essay as an "analysis [that] trades the 'too clearly identifiable patriarchal villain' of 1970s film theory" —typified in Laura Mulvey's discovery of the "male gaze"—"in for a postmodern map of intersectionality, tracing the intersecting oppressions that structure the settings and psyches of each character." In it, she analyzes the episode "College" (3.6)—which garnered fierce criticism from feminists (see Seitz and Sepinwall 357)—by A) describing events from the episode itself, then B) interpolating them with passages from influential feminists and other critical theorists. She ultimately claims that through "College," series creator David Chase developed "a materialist feminist critique of patriarchy worthy of bell hooks." (271) "At the very least," Polan replies, "there seem to be some complicated category blurrings going on here, in taking a fictional work produced by a man who has never specifically acknowledged feminism to be as critical and as analytic as the nonfictional argumentative efforts of a well-known feminist theorist." (116) Johnson's essay can barely be called an "interpretation" as such, in Polan's view: her analysis is to be expected, given the clarity of the given themes of classed and gendered exploitation within the episode itself.



The point is not so much that any such reading is the correct one but that the critic needs to be attentive to the way by which *The Sopranos* incorporates issues and themes into its plots as ambiguous motifs that can be read and evaluated in numerous ways. The show holds out positions, ethical and otherwise, only to render them ironic in the next moment...

... The difficulty of pinning the show down—or rather the ease of pinning it down but then finding that other interpreters could offer completely opposed, and yet no less assured, readings—has also to do with the particular nature of a contemporary work of popular culture like *The Sopranos*. *Postmodernism* describes a cultural condition in which such popular culture frustrates easy judgment by incorporating a multiplicity of critical positions into the text so that it becomes unclear to what extent there is one overall moral or thematic attitude that governs the work. In this respect, *The Sopranos* is a work that is part of its particular cultural moment, insofar as its meanings and morality are frequently indeterminate. (117-119)

Polan has already argued that viewers can read any narrative possibility into the series through the open cracks: it does not imply a great logical leap, therefore, to suggest that the show is built for anyone to be able to project their own moral or political strictures onto it too. This line of thinking makes *The Sopranos* something of a moral buffet.

In the first place, Polan mischaracterizes the form by which the scholars he is criticizing make their arguments. Most of those who write about these social themes in the show have attempted to demonstrate that *The Sopranos* issues social criticism from within the plot or the narrative itself, from below the level of text. It doesn't 'say' 'right' and 'wrong;' it dramatizes it.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the spectator must extract social criticism through the act of interpretation.

"A lot of what I see on the air—and other places—is giving answers," David Chase has said, adding that "I don't think that art should give answers. I think art should only pose questions.

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<sup>5</sup> This is why, say, an essay like Johnson's takes on the structure that it does: repeating major plot events and stitching them together with bits of cultural theory. It is difficult for writers with objectives adjacent to her own to escape this sort of organizational strategy, as flawed or uninspiring as it may be.

This same compositional strategy can be seen, to be sure, in the essays that Polan cites in *The Sopranos and Philosophy: I Kill, Therefore, I Am*. (114) They merely place plot points and citations from the show itself next to concepts and phrases from different philosophers and social theorists.

Art should not fill in blanks for people. That's what's called propaganda." ("Conversations With a Hitman") Elsewhere, he says: "I think *The Sopranos* is very good for you. There's a lot of morally and emotionally nourishing things in there. The show poses really hard questions about responsibility and even about what it's like to be alive in this big, cold universe." (Peyser "HBO's Godfather") These quotes might help us to shift the way we think of *The Sopranos*'s particular form of social criticism: it raises questions as opposed to making statements.

But in the absence of explicit moral or political statements by the show, Polan instead equates its meandering ethical and political queries with the cynical, detached, 'value-neutral,' morally relative attitude so ubiquitously identified with the postmodern condition.

Commentators on the postmodern condition have often said that it has to do with a suspicion or cynicism about Enlightenment notions of amelioration through reason—the world can't always be made better. *The Sopranos*, then, may be sardonically postmodern in its cynicism about progress and the rationalists who believe in it and who want their art and culture to offer uplifting, deeply serious lessons about it. (132)

But Polan is conflating two different issues here: the attitude *The Sopranos* takes towards the Enlightenment—inherited by our period through liberalism, with its now-belated faith in Reason and Progress—and the attitude *The Sopranos* takes towards morality as such. Might *The Sopranos* be able to maintain a moral and/or political position while also maintaining an apathy towards these ideas? Could Reason and Progress actually be the object of its moral scorn?

Polan is right to notice that *The Sopranos* is deeply invested in "moral ambiguity." Stephen Holden says: "In forcing us to empathize with a thug whom we watch committing heinous acts, *The Sopranos* evokes a profound moral ambiguity." ("Sympathetic Brutes in a Pop Masterpiece") Polan's misstep is to imply that the show is merely playing with its viewers by throwing the symbols of critique at them but offering nothing substantive in a seductive bout of

‘postmodernism.’ Even if it is deeply playful or ambivalent about many things, Maurice Yacowar insists, “this is not an amoral show. Portraying an immoral society should alert our moral vigilance. Its every sympathetic transgression is a moral test for the viewer... In shading its moral spectrum so finely the show provides a rigorous exercise for our relativist age.” (174)

Perhaps Polan’s argument can be made clearer and stronger if we put into simple terms what he consistently implies but never consciously acknowledges: that the questions it does raise, and its particular brand of social criticism in general, do not always fit comfortably within the dominant intellectual, moral, or political traditions we Americans have inherited—conservative or liberal. Funnily enough, whereas many progressive critics have noticed the satire which *The Sopranos* douses on social conservatives like the Soprano family, Polan is more fascinated by the way *The Sopranos* satirizes those very upper-middle class liberals that were its target audience in the first place:

Urban professional lifestyle, as the series pictures it, is filled with formulaic clichés, with a superficiality and predictability all its own, with a pontificating haughtiness, and downright silliness: for example, the upscale espresso bar, obviously modeled on Starbucks, that Paulie and Big Pussy go to in search of car thieves (Paulie renames it “Buttfucks”) and where an exoticized free-trade blend of the day is on sale, and from which Paulie steals an espresso maker. Jennifer Melfi may serve a narrative function as a mediating figure who can allow the spectator—perhaps an urban professional like her—to enter voyeuristically into the world of this violent, sexy, raunchy, and frequently politically incorrect show, but it would seem that she is no perfect conduit to that world and comes in for mockery of her own. Not merely is Melfi sanctimonious and superior (Tony has frequently to ask her to put her jargon or stock technical phrases into everyday terms), not merely is she in frequent violation of her own professional ethics (a psychotherapist who drinks between patient visits and reveals one patient’s identity to her family), but she also, ironically, is doing wrong when she, good liberal that she no doubt is, tries to do the right thing... That is, if Melfi enables Tony to master his emotions and be a more efficient boss, she would also thereby aid him in being a better criminal....

This, perhaps, is the ultimate irony: that liberal do-gooders might end up doing bad. (130-132)

Polan has touched upon a crucial point here in the second half of this passage: the use of psychotherapy as a narrative device. An analysis of this device, as has been commenced by several other writers on *The Sopranos*, may allow us to understand in exact dimensions the way it structures spectatorship, as well as its moral—the socially critical—dimension. It is to this task that we should now turn.

### CHAPTER III: BRECHT MEETS FREUD

In the emergent culture, a wider range of people will have ‘spiritual’ concerns and engage in ‘spiritual’ pursuits... There will be more theatre, not less, and no Puritan will denounce the stage and close its curtains. On the contrary, I expect that modern society will mount psychodramas far more frequently than its ancestors mounted morality plays, with patient-analysts acting out their inner lives, after which they could extemporize the final act as interpretation. We shall even institutionalize in the hospital-theatre the *Verfremdungseffekt*, with the therapeutic triumphantly enacting his own discovered will.

—Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (20)

#### **Abstract**

In this chapter, I venture a comparison between the aesthetics of *The Sopranos* and the work of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht’s “Epic theatre” provides, I believe, an optimal template for understanding some of the formal devices used in *The Sopranos* and how these strive to achieve a particular mode of spectatorship, described in Brecht’s work as the *Verfremdungseffekt*, and even a mode of social criticism. I then describe the use of psychotherapy scenes between protagonist Tony Soprano and Dr. Jennifer Melfi as a narrative device which grounds viewers in a psychoanalytic outlook. This outlook allows them to analyze not only Tony, but Dr. Melfi too, and to see them as contrasting forces in American society.

Fernando Canet says, "... there are several elements that justify a closer analogy and connection between Dr Melfi and the viewers. First, both follow Tony's life from outside the mafia world: Dr Melfi through the therapy window and viewers through the television screen. Second, both are fascinated by his dark side... Third... Melfi and the viewers are involved in Tony's life over time..." Canet ventures to describe the character of Dr. Melfi as something more than just a character within the world of *The Sopranos*: she is a "narrative device" to be superimposed onto that world, or a "meta-viewer". (98) Dr. Melfi operates, in large part, as an audience surrogate in their relationship with the anti-hero.

As Glen O. Gabbard (who was a part of a team of clinicians who opened up a forum on the *Slate* blog to discuss and debate the use of psychotherapy in *The Sopranos*) has noted in his book on the series, many previous films and television shows had placed their protagonist in psychotherapy as merely a means exposition—or, worse, as pure comic or sexual fodder. The therapy scenes in *The Sopranos*, on the other hand, took great care to be realistic and to avoid cheap gags. The show has been applauded, even awarded, for its faithful depiction of psychotherapeutic practice. (Gabbard 3-9)

Nancy Franklin, cutting to the heart of the matter, says: "Tony Soprano's sessions with Dr. Jennifer Melfi... are more than just a device for spicing up a genre that seems pretty well played out. They're essential to the show's very existence, like a pacemaker..." ("The Hit Man's Burden")

It could be postulated that there is not such a great distance between televisual spectatorship and psychotherapy itself, because they are structured alike temporally. Jane Feuer has cogently suggested just as such:

One might conjecture that therapy is also "serialized" in much the same way as television shows. It takes place at regular intervals, once, twice, or more a week. Psychoanalysts used to refer to the time reserved for

each patient as his or her “hour.” Similarly, TV drama is said to occupy an hour. Although both by now have shrunk to about 45 minutes of actual time, the idea of selling yourself or your product “by the hour” remains common to both. Long ago Horace Newcomb wrote that “intimacy” was characteristic of the television medium and this syncs with therapy as well. (265)

It is ironic that so many commentators, such as Maurice Yacowar and Brett Martin, describe the narrative structure of *The Sopranos* as ‘serial’ or “Dickensian” when Chase has declared a commitment to the episodic:

What I wanted to do was do a little movie every week. Even though these things are connected, they’re like 13 little movies... In fact, there was a little bit of friction between myself and HBO, because they were more interested in the serialized elements, and I was not...

We can tell these stories at a different pace: we can have them build slowly, for one thing; we can have them build really quickly. The other thing is, we don’t have to explain everything, like at a network—it really is the old Hollywood adage, ‘tell them what they’re gonna see, show it to them, then tell them what they just saw.’ We don’t do that... Also, I felt that the movies I like best are movies where—notice I said movies, not television shows, because I don’t think this happens—something happens in act I, someone says something, and then you see a pattern of this recur...

Such a narrative structure, he suggests, demands a very active mode of spectatorship. “It’s active watching, or something; you need to bring every little piece of information you’re given to the watching of the entire thing.” (Bogdanovich interview)

This episodic narrative structure, as well as the particular mode of spectatorship it supposedly encourages, recalls the work of Bertolt Brecht, a 20<sup>th</sup> century German and Marxist dramatist, poet, theorist, and social critic whose work has had a great influence on film theory, especially as interpreted and proliferated by the *Cahier du Cinema* critics, especially Jean-Luc Godard. (Lelis *Bertolt Brecht, Cahiers du cinema, and Contemporary Film Theory*)

Although David Chase has never explicitly acknowledged Brecht as an inspiration, there is an argument to be made that Chase inherited Brechtian theory through Godard, one of his auteur idols. Chase's praise and debt to Luis Bunuel and Federico Fellini is well-noted, but it does seem as if his aesthetic lineage does derive principally through Godard:

A: How and when did you decide you wanted to write for TV and movies?

D: When I was in film school. I went to film school because I wanted to be a director, and that's where I learned that films had to have a script. Writing a script was cheap in comparison to making a film...

I was inflamed by Jean-Luc Godard and stuff like that, not knowing what the hell I was even talking about—or what Godard was talking about. [*Laughs*] (Seitz and Sepinwall 329)

“I wasn't hip enough to know that I was seeing new film techniques in a film like [Godard's] *Breathless*... But it sure *seemed* different. Godard said all you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun. I certainly got that part of it. I was into it...” (Martin 37) Chase's graduate film “... was called *The Rise and Fall of Bug Manousos*. It was about a grad student who has a fantasy of this alternate universe where he's a mobster.” (Seitz and Sepinwall 329-330) That film

...was about alienation. It was about a guy driven crazy by the cheeziness, sanctimoniousness, and fakery of America society. He was frustrated—he shotgunned his TV set. And what got to him were the commercials, the astronauts, and the fact that white bread Nixonians ruled America... And he dreamed of becoming a gangster, an old-fashioned gangster in a pin-striped suit, and he got his wish. He got killed in the end... (Lavery and Thompson 20)

“It was sort of tongue-in-cheek, deconstructivist bullshit,” Chase later recalled. (Oxfeld “Family Man”) “It was terrible. Just some Godardian half-assed gangster thing.” (Martin 39)

There is one passing reference to Brecht directly in *The Sopranos*. It happens in the context of music, and of therapy: Tony Soprano is telling his “shrink,” Dr. Melfi, about an old



neighborhood kid with a cleft palate named ‘Jimmy Smash.’ Tony shares how he and his friends used to make him sing “Mack the Knife”: a song which occurs, of course, in Brecht’s famous *Threepenny Opera*. (The main plotline of that episode, it should be noted, turns on racial tensions over duties in the music producing industry. [“A Hit is a Hit” 1.10]) Brecht often used music to break up and then comment back on the action of his dramas, as opposed to depicting it as a natural outgrowth of the emotional subtext of the scene (as in American musical theatre post-*Oklahoma*!) *The Sopranos*, too, scored its music to help point things out. (Weinstein “Creator David Chase Revisits the Music of ‘The Sopranos’”)

Bertolt Brecht remains well-known for his work in the avant-garde theatre, where he developed what he called the “Epic” (or, later on, “dialectical”) model. In many ways, we can find a direct imprint of Epic theatre on *The Sopranos*. And what a recognition of Brecht’s influence on *The Sopranos* can offer us is what was left ambiguous in Polan’s work: a theory of spectatorship that understood its intrinsic connection to a mode of dialectical social criticism.

The Epic theatre has been the subject of innumerable inquiries about art and its political potential, especially amongst Marxists. His own training in Marxist dialectics made him deeply concerned with the spectator’s understanding of history and reality and the capacity of human will to change them. His work in the avant-garde was a direct outgrowth of this political objective. It formed the basis of his resentment of naturalism, which he thought of as a bourgeois illusion which essentializes class domination as the ‘universal’ human condition. In his own theatre, then, he experimented with different ways of breaking the narrative and frustrating the spectator’s ‘suspension of disbelief.’ He wanted, above all, to demystify the status quo, to reach beyond everyday appearances and lay bare the relations between men.

Brecht developed and used different devices, whether technical or narrative, to break up the action, break the illusion, and engender in the audience a very specific mode of spectatorship, described by Brecht with the term *Verfremdungseffekt* (translated either as “alienation-” or “estrangement-effect”) and the phrase “smoker’s theatre.” Thompson puts it cleverly: “It is not the design on stage that distinguishes a Brechtian production, but the design on audience.” (145) The *Verfremdungseffekt* necessitates that the spectator does not empathize with the characters before them (or, at least, does not become ‘swept up’ by empathy), but rather analyzes them. They see characters, and social conditions, ‘in process,’ being produced, rather than as a given product.

In the technical realm, Brecht insisted on “separating the elements”—lighting, sound, staging, etc.—and making them work against one another, as opposed to in a unity. (“The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre”) Sometimes, he would leave open the theatre curtains which would typically hide the backstage areas. The point here is to remind the spectator that they are, in fact, in a theatre, and watching a presentation of reality. This recalls, in a way, Polan’s analysis of the final cut-to-black of *The Sopranos*; it interrupts the viewers stream of consciousness by reminding them that, after all, it was just TV anyways.

Brecht often ascribed as much importance—if not more—to the episodic structure of the Epic drama as to the technical “separation of elements” in the process of engendering the *Verfremdungseffekt*. Episodic dramaturgy serves to break up and separate the traditional, Aristotelian plot structure—inciting incident, rising action, climax, denouement—and frustrate the thought of inevitability that accompanies it. Its character is fragmentary, as opposed to linear and “universal.” This ‘open space’ in the narrative is designed to allow the spectator a moment to pause, reflect, and see the things ‘in process’; moments which constitute a ‘break’ or ‘interruption’ in the narrative (especially the presence of music) also serve to comment back on that narrative:

“the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement.” (“A Short Organum for the Theatre”)

As Peter Thompson has demonstrated, Brecht was directly influenced by the episodic narrative techniques of the picaresque. (5-10) Ironically, this coincides with Dana Polan’s description of the narrative rhythm of *The Sopranos*:

Perhaps a better reference might be the literature of the picaresque, that genre in which a character of relatively fixed identity and minimum psychological development over time goes through an episodic series of adventures that come to him (or, more rarely, her) as discrete events and that never coalesce into a single story, never add up to constitute a progress of any sort, and maintain the central character as fairly unchanged from one episode to the next. Think of Voltaire’s *Candide*, who unflinchingly wanders from one situation to another, learning only what he implicitly knew all along—that this is the best of all possible worlds and that he must cultivate his own garden. This could be Tony’s lesson too, one that he also has always known, except that his garden is the erstwhile “Garden State” known as New Jersey, and it is not so much to be cultivated as exploited and picked over. (60-61)

Many of Brecht’s own dramas are meditations on ideology, the justification systems people employ to rationalize their loyalty to a set of economic arrangements that either exploits them or helps them exploit others. Because of this, Brechtian characters are often contradictory. (In case we miss it, sometimes Brecht even dramatizes the contradictory character by supplying them with an alter ego, often silent.) Eric Bentley, in his introduction to *Mother Courage and Her Children*, says that if the contradictory character can be described in one way, then they can (should) also be described opposite terms. (Mother Courage is defined by her courage, but she is also cowardly; she verbally repeats and repeats that she hates the war, but functionally, she makes her living off of it, so she has to not hate it enough. Acts of cowardice, in fact, contribute to all her children’s deaths.) Brecht’s characters are at war with themselves; one half of them strives for better and

adopts that line of reasoning, while the other half remains unable to break free from the internal inhibitions set upon the mind by capitalism, which disempowers them from challenging capitalist property relations in the external world.

Does this not sound like the characters of *The Sopranos*? It ought to be expected for an anti-hero protagonist to possess something of an alter ego; besides, the notion that there are “two Tonys” is—of course—also embedded in the show itself from the very beginning. In the pilot, Tony describes himself as such:

TONY: You read the papers? You know, the government’s use of electronic surveillance and various legal strategies to squeeze my business?

MELFI: Do you have any qualms about how you actually make a living?

TONY: Yeah. I find I have to be the sad clown—laughing on the outside, crying on the inside.

See, things are trending downwards. Used to be, a guy got pinched, he took his prison jolt, no matter what. Everybody upheld a code of silence. Nowadays? No values. Guys have no room for the penal experience. So everybody turns government witness.

The pilot then ends with a song that reinforces this dualism: “The beast in me is caged by frail and fragile bonds...” (1.1) At the end of “College,” Tony is visibly struck by a Nathaniel Hawthorne quote in a university hallway which reads: “NO MAN CAN WEAR ONE FACE TO HIMSELF AND ANOTHER TO THE MULTITUDE WITHOUT FINALLY GETTING BEWILDERED AS TO WHICH MAY BE TRUE.” (1.5) Another episode—titled “Two Tonys”—begins the fifth season, in which Tony tells Dr. Melfi, “Forget about the way that Tony Soprano makes his way in the world. That’s just to feed his children. There’s two Tony Sopranos. You’ve never seen the other one. That’s the one I wanna show to you.” (5.1) Stephen Holden puts it neatly when he says “There are essentially two Tonys. One is a mobster involved in theft, loan-sharking, drugs and corrupt

unions. This Tony takes brutal pleasure in beating up and killing people who cross him. The other Tony is a straitlaced family man..." ("Sympathetic Brutes in a Pop Masterpiece") For Glen O. Gabbard, Tony's character is best described as having a "vertical split"; he "is most 'in character' when he appears to be 'out of character.'" (27-32; 36)

What I want to suggest, most importantly, is that the therapy scenes in *The Sopranos* make use of the Brechtian technique. First off, they break up the narrative action: 'not much happens' in these therapy scenes; they "just talk." (Of course, however, there's often plenty of action in the subtext—like 'transference.') Within the fabric of the individual episode, they constitute slivers which separate other parts of the plot that comment back upon the entirety of action. They investigate Tony's Soprano's subjective feelings or motives (conscious or unconscious), sometimes by providing background information from his past that may help explain some of his present feelings or behaviors; or, often, by catching him in a lie. By forcing the viewer to draw these connections on their own, these therapy scenes contribute to an outlook very much like the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. We may be able to say that they model the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, but replace Marxian theories with psychoanalytic ones. By fusing Brechtian spectatorship with psychoanalytic theories, *The Sopranos* transforms psychoanalysis itself into something of an *aesthetic*.

I say replace; really, I mean supplement. Capitalism is no less the target in *The Sopranos* than in Brecht's work. Money is the ultimate pollutant in New Jersey. *The Sopranos* simply takes a different approach to the critique of the cash nexus than Brecht: it emphasizes the extreme unhappiness and insanity it impresses upon people living under its reign. It constitutes an examination of subjectivity under capitalist conditions, in the form of a psychiatric case study.

Tony—and Dr. Melfi too—ought to be taken as typologies in the contemporary American scene. As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it in his classic study of moral philosophy, *After Virtue*:

There is a type of dramatic tradition... which possesses a set of stock characters immediately recognizable to the audience. Such characters partially define the possibilities of plot and action. To understand them is to be provided with a means of interpreting the behavior of the actors who play them...

Characters... are, so to speak, the moral representatives of their culture and they are so because of the way in which moral and metaphysical ideas and theories assume through them an embodied existence in the social world. *Characters* are the masks worn by moral philosophies. (27-28)

Tony, the gangster, is the American experiment in miniature—“a walking advertisement for American capitalism,” as David Chase once put it. (Bogdanovich interview) Dr. Melfi, on the other hand, personifies what Philip Rieff once called “the therapeutic,” of which Ellen Willis says, “Its values are honesty, self-knowledge, assumption of responsibility for the whole of what one does, freedom from inherited codes of family, church, tribe in favor of a universal humanism: in other words, the values of the Enlightenment, as revised and expanded by Freud's critique of scientific rationalism for ignoring the power of unconscious desire.” (“Our Mobsters, Ourselves”)

“Early episodes can feel like containers for baseline psychoanalytic insights,” Emily Nussbaum writes:

In the first, Tony discovers that “talking [helps]. Hope comes in many forms.” In the second, he learns that if he doesn’t admit to his rage at his mother, he will displace it onto others. Next, he struggles with whether he is a golem—an empty self, a monster for hire. And by “Pax Soprana,” he confesses his love to Melfi and she tells him about transference. “This psychiatry shit, apparently what you’re feeling is not what you’re feeling,” he explains to Carmela. “And what you’re not feeling is your real agenda.” (“The Long Con”)

The therapy scenes with Dr. Melfi throughout the series outline many of the principles of the psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity, many of them concerning personality, depression, aggression, self-destructiveness, sexuality, and their relationship to the human body.

According to Freudian theory, the bodily instincts—sexual and aggressive—register in the psyche as desires, but ultimately must be rejected for one to fully participate in civilization. He remains convinced that those instincts never go away, of course, but they must not acquire direct satisfaction. Civilization requires “discontents.” Those instincts are either repressed—banished to the unconscious, where they live on beyond direct supervision of the ego—or they may be sublimated: stripped of their bodily character and driven into higher cultural aims, such as work, family, art, religion, or politics.

These finer points of Freud’s thought, to be sure, are never given out as doctrine in *The Sopranos*, even if sometimes Dr. Melfi didactically quotes Freud verbatim, as she does when she says “Depression is rage turned inwards.” (“Cold Cuts” 5.10) More often, the psychoanalytic insights meted out in therapy are subtler; they come at the end of a broader narrative and thematic arc and allow the viewer an opportunity to reflect (or, in case they have missed the point of what they have just seen).

Take “Amour Fou,” for example. (3.12) In the third season, after the death his mother, Livia, Tony meets a woman Gloria Trillo, a successful car saleswoman, in Dr. Melfi’s office, and begins dating her. When the dynamics of the relationship become quite volatile, Tony asks Dr. Melfi’s advice, to which she describes the romance a recipe for disaster: “Amour fou, as the French call it. Crazy love. All consuming.” Later in that episode, Tony goes over to Gloria’s house to break things off. “Look. It’s over. I mean, we had our, uh, ‘mofo,’ or whatever, and it was great. But now it’s time to put it to bed.” Gloria cries Livia’s “poor you!” at him, to which he replies: “I

didn't just meet you. I've known you my whole fucking life! My mother was just like you—bottomless, black hole!” In a final therapy scene, Tony and Dr. Melfi explore this aborted relationship:

MELFI: Ask yourself: how did you recognize in Gloria, under all her layers of sophistication, this deeply wounded, angry being that would let you replicate once again your relationship with your mother?

TONY: I don't wanna fuck my mother. I don't give a shit what you say, you're never gonna convince me.

MELFI: Not fuck. Try to please her. Try to win her love.

TONY: [I'm] Forty fucking years old!

MELFI: We need to repeat what's familiar, even if it's bad for us. Gloria's need for drama; the selfishness; the incessant self-regard. At one time, in your mother's hands, it passed for love. (“Amour Fou” 3.12)

*The Sopranos* is especially fascinated by sexuality—there is, after all, so much of it in the show—and it even didactically proliferates psychoanalytic theories about it, even beyond Tony's Oedipal considerations. “Mergers and Acquisitions,” for example, deals, with almost comic specificity, with psychoanalytic theories of masochism. (4.8) As Tony learns from his sister, Janice, and his mistress, Valentina, both of whom have made erotic contact with one of his “capos,” Ralphie Cifaretto, pain and humiliation are sexual ends in and of themselves for him; he does not seek genital stimulation from his sexual partners as an extension of the erotic encounter:

TONY: I thought all that stuff was just, like, a run-up to the act... I received regular beatings when I was a kid, but I'm not going around looking for some woman to hook up jumper cables to my private parts.

MELFI: More than likely, he had a controlling and punishing mother. She loved him, but showed it only in connection with some sort of violent or abusive act.

TONY: Is everything about everybody really about their mothers? Alright, back to the other thing: for a guy like that, who's going out with a woman—he could technically not have penisary contact with her volvo?



*The Sopranos* remains shockingly loyal to Freudian orthodoxy, even in its most grotesque principles: the Oedipus complex; the “death drive”; and the “repetition compulsion,” among others. These principles still manage to shock us because they directly contradict important elements of the hegemony of Enlightened thought (thus why they have been routinely edited out by ‘revisionists’). For starters: psychoanalysis incontrovertibly undermines the myth of rational psychic autonomy, the capacity for people to use pure Reason to escape the constraints of the outside world. There is no room for the sort of optimism that would posit the future perfectibility of Man, nor even his ability to leave the past behind him. Progress has no providence in the kingdom of Man, for he is ultimately a “prisoner of the past,” as the phrase goes; and he does not even know who has him in chains.

Norman O. Brown suggests that this very insight is the starting point of all of Freud’s subsequent theories: the doctrine of repression, which tracks the expulsion of certain components of psychic activity from the individual’s direct awareness and its relocation into the unconscious mind (discovered through the study of the life of neurotics, “the interpretation of dreams,” and the “psychopathology of everyday life”—the *parapraxes* such as slips of the tongue and other mistakes, and daydreams and other fantasies). (Brown 3-6) The point of psychotherapy, at its best, is to provide an environment in which one is to explore their own unconscious, and thus identify those influences of the past on their present disorder.

Early therapy scenes, Canet argues, serve to establish a “pro-attitude” towards Tony, to generate viewer sympathy towards him:

... [a] common feature of antihero narratives is an exploration of the past to uncover the reasons that justify the antihero’s immoral actions in the present. Three flashbacks are introduced during Tony’s sessions with Dr Melfi... his childhood traumas. The purpose of this journey into his backstory is to explain how an innocent boy could have turned into a criminal... the reasons that justify this evolution are his mother’s

unrestrained and aggressive attitudes towards him and his father's immoral behaviour. The narrative thus reflects an effort to portray Tony as a victim of a tough background that left him with no choice but to pursue an immoral lifestyle. (Canet 104)

“...if the show was playful,” Emily Nussbaum writes, “it took one thing seriously: Tony’s therapy sessions with Melfi. He’d gone to her for help with panic attacks, but their meetings quickly became something stranger and deeper, an experiment in self-knowledge. The show’s central question was simple and bold: Can this man change?” (“The Long Con”)

The narrative story of *The Sopranos* begins when Tony suffers a frightening panic attack—one that renders him unconscious holding a container of lighter fluid over an open flame. He is grilling meat for his son’s thirteenth birthday party when a family of ducks who had waddled into his pool took flight. He is sent to the “unreconstructed Freudian” psychotherapist Dr. Melfi to look for answers. Deeply marinated in psychoanalytic thought and technique, she instead challenges him to dig deeper and ask more questions of himself as he struggles to confront his profound feelings of inner emptiness and to maintain psychic equilibrium between the requirements of his crime-oriented work and the unforeseen struggles of marriage and parenthood.

The pilot opens with a series of frames accompanied by dead silence: Tony sits on the couch in Dr. Melfi’s waiting room, looking upwards at a statue of an unclothed woman with a deeply ambiguous expression on his face. This woman—who bears some resemblance to both the woman who will soon invite Tony into her office and to the woman we learn to be his mother—casts her dark gaze back down at him as she folds her arms above her head, revealing her bare breasts. Tony is placed between the statue’s legs, which evokes two meanings: birth and excrement. “This is... an image of biological elimination/evacuation: Tony is a human turd, shat

out by a mother who treats her son like shit.” (Seitz and Sepinwall 15) Scatological language, as we will see, routinely describes the wasteful dynamics of the Soprano family.

When that first therapy session begins between Dr. Melfi and Tony, viewers must recognize the so-called “talking cure” that she uses. At first, viewers catch back-and-forth shots (from a near-point-of-view angle) between Dr. Melfi and Tony, the awkward silence between them sterilizing the air. She begins questioning him about the day of his recent collapse:

MEFLI: What line of work are you in?

TONY: Waste management consultant... It's impossible for me to talk to a psychiatrist.

MELFI: Any thoughts at all on why you blacked out?

TONY: I don't know. Stress, maybe.

MELFI: About what?

TONY: I don't know...

At this point, the spectator's viewpoint shifts: we are no longer watching back-and-forth shots of the two, but we begin to see the images of Tony's everyday life overlay his speech. In the context of his speech, he is still responding to the questions being posed to him by Dr. Melfi, but from the vantage point of the viewer, it is as if he is directly narrating his life to them. First, they see an image of his house as the sun rises; then, it cuts to a shot of his eye. The viewer is looking through the window into his soul.

TONY: The morning of the day I got sick, I'd been thinking... It's good to be in something from the ground floor. And I came too late for that, I know. But lately, I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over.

MELFI: Many Americans, I think, feel that way.

TONY: I think about my father. He never reached the heights like me. In a lot of ways, he had it better. He had his people, they had their standards, they had pride. Today, what do we got?

As is to be expected in a Freudian case study, viewers have to practice dream analysis (even as Tony insists that he “understands Freud”). So, later on, Tony verbalizes a dream to Dr. Melfi:

TONY: I had a dream last night. My bellybutton was a Phillips head screw... and I'm working on unscrewing it, and when I get it unscrewed, my penis falls off. You know, I pick it up and I'm holding it and I'm running around, looking for the guy who used to work on my Lincoln when I drove Lincolns so he can put it back on. And you know, I'm holding it up, and this bird swoops down and grabs it in its beak and flies off with it.

MELFI: What kind of bird?

TONY: I don't know. Seagull or something.

MELFI: A water bird?

TONY: I saw *The Birds* last week. You think maybe that planted the idea?

MELFI: What else is a water bird?

TONY: Pelican, flamingo...

MELFI: What about ducks?

TONY: ... Those goddamn ducks.

MELFI: What is it about those ducks that meant so much to you?

TONY: I don't know, it was just a trip... having those wild creatures come into my pool and have their little babies. I was sad to see them go. Oh, Jesus, fuck. Now he's gonna cry. Shit. Fuck me.

MELFI: When the ducks gave birth to those babies, they became a family.

TONY: You're right. That's the link. A connection. I'm afraid I'm gonna lose my family... like I lost the ducks.

What viewers are brought to recognize is an unconscious connection between castration, loss, and isolation in the mind of their protagonist. Dr. Melfi walks viewers through the interpretive act, as if demonstrating how it is done, before they are expected to perform it for the rest of the series on our own. Three episodes later, at the very beginning of “Meadowlands,” viewers see the first dream

sequence, one that receives no discussion within therapy. The rest, for the most part, are exclusively up to them to interpret.

The psychoanalytic *Verfremdungseffekt* of *The Sopranos* ought to be understood as the ability for viewers to apply the same sort of psychoanalytically-inflected insight onto the action they are watching independently, without the direct mediation of Dr. Melfi's character. In an episode such as "Test Dream," with its 27-minute long dream sequence, spectators are forced, with quite a bit of intensity, to try and surmise what unconscious thoughts or desires are producing certain dream contents. We might also venture to say that the long, pregnant silences that fill *The Sopranos* can be an opportunity for the psychoanalytic *Verfremdungseffekt*, or an exchange of glances. A rather random example of this is at the very end of "Stage 5," when Tony hugs his nephew Christopher at Christopher's child's christening. (7.2) There is no dialogue, but the viewer sees the dread-ridden expression on both of their faces as they cling to each other's shoulders. Given the long history between them, and Tony's fear that Christopher's recent film "Cleaver" really represents Christopher's unconscious urge to get revenge on Tony for a matter of infidelity, there is plenty of room for a psychoanalytic *Verfremdungseffekt*.

In fact, the viewer is certainly forced to turn the psychoanalytic *Verfremdungseffekt* back onto Tony's psychotherapy itself, and his psychotherapist, Dr. Melfi herself, too. Both remain, after all, objects within the narrative that the viewer is supposed to interpret. The psychoanalytic *Verfremdungseffekt* must be applied, say, all the times that Tony lies to her in their therapy sessions. A demonstrative example of this comes when Tony brings up the issue of a man, Alex Mahaffey, to whom he had lent gambling money and by whom he had not been repaid. The shot returns from Tony in the car with his nephew Christopher as they drive past and recognize this Mahaffey back into the therapy room with Melfi:

TONY: ...there was an issue of an outstanding loan—

MELFI: Can I stop you for a second? I don't know where this story is going... but there are a few ethical ground rules we should quickly get out of the way. What you tell me here falls under doctor-patient confidentiality, except if I was... uh... I was to hear let's say, a murder was to take place—not that I'm saying it would, but if—if a patient comes to me and tells me a story where someone's going to get hurt, I'm supposed to go to the authorities. Technically. You said you were in waste management.

TONY: The environment.

MELFI: Dr. Cusamano, besides being your family physician, is also your next door neighbor. You see what I'm saying? I don't know what happened with this fellow... I'm just saying.

TONY: Nothing. We had coffee.

Then, the shot returns us to the actual scene of Tony with Christopher and Mahaffey. A “doo wop” song plays in the background as we watch the two gangsters chase down and run over Mahaffey in Christopher's “\$60,000 Lexus.”

It is only too ironic that for this man in “waste management,” an engagement with psychotherapy turns out to be a form of “waste management” to him—he comes here to get rid of his guilt feelings, instead of taking the insights arrived at here and internalizing their moral lessons. He takes only the advice which helps him organize the variables around him in a manner convenient to his exploits. “I get good tips here,” he tells Dr. Melfi. (“Meadowlands” 1.4)

By engendering in the viewer a psychoanalytic *Verfremdungseffekt*, *The Sopranos* ultimately prepares the viewer for Tony's therapy to ultimately fail and gives them the tools to understand why. And ultimately, it is connected to his work.

A genetic, paternal theme of inheritance is established early on. In “Down Neck,” A.J. has gotten in trouble at his private Catholic school, Verbum Dei, after stealing sacramental wine. (1.7) That his son's behavior lies outside of the parameters of permissibility trigger a series of flashbacks

to Tony's own childhood, when he discovered that his father was a mobster and broke the rules for his pay. (Though of course he starts by deflecting—"Don't start talking to me about legitimate business. What about chemical companies dumping all that shit into the water, and they get these deformed babies popping up all over the place?") Tony's subsequent description of Johnny is virtually a mirror image of himself—an impulsive and violent man who "knew how to have a good time" but ultimately "wasn't around much"—leading to the consideration:

MELFI: Do you hold your father responsible for what you've become?

TONY: Yeah, sometimes I think about what life would've been like if my father wouldn't have gotten mixed up in the things he got mixed up in, how life would've been different. Maybe I would've been selling patio furniture in San Diego, or whatever... My son is doomed, right?

MELFI: Why do you say that?

TONY: This is the part where I'm supposed to tell you how terrible my father was, and the terrible things he did to me, and how he ruined my life. But I'll tell you something, I was proud to be Johnny Soprano's kid!...

MELFI: Do you think that's how your son feels about you?

TONY: Yeah, probably. And I'm glad! I'm glad if he's proud of me! But you see, that's the bind I'm in—because I don't want him to be like me! He can be anything he wants to be...

MELFI: Have you communicated any of this to your son?

TONY: Not in so many words; probably not at all. What difference would it make? You said so yourself—it's in the blood, it's hereditary.

MELFI: Genetic predispositions are only that—predispositions. It's not a destiny set in stone. People have choices!

TONY: She finally offers an opinion!

MELFI: Well, they do! You think that everything that happens is preordained? You don't think that human beings possess free will?

TONY: How come I'm not making fucking pots in Peru? You're born into this shit. You are what you are.

MELFI: Within that, there's a range of choices. This is America.

TONY: Right. America.

The notion that Tony's genes are tainted is reinforced when, in the second season, we learn that Johnny Soprano himself had suffered from panic attacks. "Well, in those days, we called it a 'condition.'" ("Big Girls Don't Cry" 2.5) Tony's concern, then, is that he will pass his condition down; A.J. has already inherited Tony's name—what else? In the third season, in "Fortunate Son," we see these fears materialize, when at the end of a football practice, A.J. is named defensive captain and subsequently faints. (3.3)

"Fortunate Son" also provides us crucial exposition about the specific triggers and "root causes" for Tony's own panic attacks. In therapy, he talks about a panic attack he had after a confrontation with his daughter Meadow's boyfriend, Noah. Tony disapproves of Noah because he is half-black; and at first, we are led to believe that Tony's attack is triggered when he sees a box of "Uncle Ben's Rice" in the pantry ("The logo," Dr. Melfi opines). But Dr. Melfi's line of questioning takes things elsewhere. She gets Tony to recall that he was "taking all of the gabagool and shit out of the fridge" when his hyperventilation began, following up: "I'm thinking, when you first came here, the panic attack with ducks—as I remember it, you were grilling meat, weren't you?" Another therapy session then deposits memories of Tony's very first panic attack and further deepens the connection with meat: after having watched Johnny chop off the pinky finger of Mr. Satriale, the pork store owner (a venue Tony now controls), Tony fainted after watching his mother cut a slab of meat whilst flirting with Johnny.

MELFI: Obviously, we've finally touched on something here. What you witnessed that day—where the meat came from—and your mother's great pleasure in it.

TONY: It was the only time you could on her being in a good mood, when the weekly meat delivery from Satriale's showed up at the house... probably the only time the man got laid... pretty sick, huh? Getting turned on by free cold cuts.



MELFI: Do you think that your mother questioned why the meat was free? The meat that was going into her children's mouths?

TONY: I don't know—I don't wanna know! I don't even wanna think about any of this shit!

MELFI: I'm sure it was too much for you then, too. That's why you short-circuited. Puberty; witnessing not only your mother and father's sexuality, but also the violence and blood so closely connected to the food you were about to eat; and also, the thought that someday, you might be called upon to bring home the bacon, like your father.

TONY: All this from a slice of gabagool?

A corrupt enterprise, dependent on violence, “brings home the bacon,” and the meat itself becomes corrupted by the blood spilled over it. (“Fortunate Son” 3.3) If Tony is the “shit” that Livia pushed out of her body, then his body is only the other side of her consumption of corrupted meat. But when Tony's own body itself consumes the tainted meat, it cannot expunge the contaminating force the same way Livia's can, by means of expulsion. His stomach becomes a repository of the poisoned meat which corrupts every fiber of his being. His father's ways marinate themselves in Tony's very flesh, in his instincts, his “subconscious.”

In “Everybody Hurts,” Tony's corrupt instincts find embodiment when he loans his friend Artie Bucco \$50,000 for an investment. (4.6) When the money is lost, Artie attempts suicide, unable to face Tony about the money. Tony relieves Artie of his obligation to repay the sum if Artie will wipe Tony's tab at his restaurant. Artie asks about the difference between the two totals, and Tony says, “I'll assume he's dead and collect the 50 G's.” (He sends a soldier to assault the man who took the investment and recollect that total.) Artie tells him: “You saw the whole thing, didn't you? You knew exactly what was gonna happen... You can see 20 moves down the road! Please, I don't blame you—I envy you! It's like an instinct, like a hawk sees a little mouse moving in a cornfield from a mile above.” Therapy allows Tony a chance to reflect:

TONY: So, he says I planned it all along, like I could see 20 steps down the road how it was gonna go, and how he was gonna get screwed.

MELFI: Did you? See it?

TONY: I don't know. According to him, it's subconscious, second nature.

MELFI: But the accusation bothers you.

TONY: Is that the kind of person I am? A hawk? It's an animal!

In "The Second Coming," A.J. has returned to community college and is deeply taken by W.B. Yeats's poem by the same name and continues a plummet into existential despair. Late in that same episode, a short scene shows a peaceful lake where ducks can be heard quacking. One of Tony's waste management trucking companies begins to dump toxic asbestos into that body of water as the quacking fades. A.J. tragically attempts suicide by drowning—in the very same pool that Tony's ducks once made a family in.

TONY: Obviously, I'm prone to depression. A certain bleak attitude about the world. But I know I can handle it. Your kids though—It's like, when they're little, and they get sick; you'd give anything in the world to trade places with them so they don't have to suffer. And then to think you're the cause of it!

MELFI: How are you the cause?

TONY: It's in his blood, this miserable fucking existence! My rotten fucking putrid genes have infected my kid's soul! That's my gift to my son!

*The Sopranos* thus psychoanalytically recapitulates the religious myth of the passing along of the sins of the father unto the son. Tony, and his ilk, are all dominated by their history: they are "prisoners of the past."

Because Tony's condition is (or at least seems to be) biological, then it would seem to exist beyond the direct control of human will; a version of the ancient model of 'fate.' No wonder why,

in the end, Tony's therapy fails: if the promise of "the therapeutic" is to help free people from their chains, then of what use could it possibly be once it is accepted as an axiom that Reason and Progress must ultimately bend to the forces of the past?

It cannot be said that *The Sopranos* ever offers a definitive answer; at least, not in the didactic form that perhaps someone like Dana Polan might demand. But the push-and-pull, dialectical conflict between Dr. Melfi and Tony—and the social forces they embody—raise a set of questions, at the very least, about life, death, loss, love, family, work, and agency in our own culture and our own time subjecting the American Dream to dream analysis.

## CHAPTER IV: *THE SOPRANOS* IN AN AGE OF DIMINISHING EXPECTATIONS

“The show’s sense that all its characters—civilians and gangsters—are living small, robotically materialistic lives... presents lines and images about decline, decay, and the irrevocable passing of old ways, as well as an atmosphere of dissatisfaction anchored in the suspicion that things were better during some (largely unspecified) past.”

—Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall (22)

“No convention of the gangster film is more strongly established than this: it is dangerous to be alone. And yet the very conditions of success make it impossible not to be alone, for success is always the establishment of an *individual* preeminence that must be imposed on others, in whom it automatically arouses hatred; the successful man is an outlaw. The gangster’s whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd, and he always dies *because* he is an individual ... At bottom, the gangster is doomed because he is under the obligation to succeed, not because the means he employs are unlawful. In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, *all* means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is *punished* for success.”

—Robert Warshow (“The Gangster as Tragic Hero”)

### **Abstract**

In this chapter, I assess the overlap between *The Sopranos* and Christopher Lasch’s social criticism. *The Sopranos* depicts a society in decline, with its infrastructure corroding, full of useless commodities, and peopled by deeply unhappy, disordered people. *The Sopranos* echoes Lasch in suggesting that the ‘decline of the family’ has to do with capitalism’s invasion of it. This gives rise to a sense of non-responsibility, and ultimately, stasis.

There is another dimension to Brecht’s Epic theatre that we did not touch upon in our previous discussion of his work: the importance of ‘historicization.’

Likewise, *The Sopranos* seems insistent on reminding its viewers that it is set in the postmodern scene. As each episode begins, the fragmentary, electronic, and eclectic song playing in the background, Alabama 3's "Woke Up This Morning" (which is itself, to be sure, deeply postmodernist in its compositional techniques) sets the mood; we are in the so-called 'digital age.' The first images we see are a series of parallel lines, separating square white tiles, passing overhead. A blinding light appears at the end of this structure, and after that light has absorbed the screen, our view clarifies to reveal shots of a landscape. We see that we have just exited the Lincoln Tunnel, only to discover that we have arrived in New Jersey, having come from New York. The Big Apple is being left behind, the Twin Towers now in the rearview mirror (once described as human "filing cabinets" by Lewis Mumford<sup>6</sup>). The city and its modernist, utilitarian face fade from view as we drive through "post-industrial" New Jersey, before eventually pulling up the driveway of a suburban "McMansion" which has an architectural character that may be best described as a 'pastiche' or even a 'simulacra'—a copy of something for which there is no original. (Miller "A McMansion for the Suburban Mob Family")

This journey, and the architecture viewers see along the way, seem to have a lot to say about our recent American history. Thus why so many different commentators make reference to them when they speak about the themes in *The Sopranos*. Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall, for one, consider the opening credits essentially a recapitulation of the American experiment:

The American assimilation story has one component if you're a native-born WASP, two if you're an immigrant.

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<sup>6</sup> The Twin Towers, before they were symbol for the War on Terror, were "once... the two sleekest symbols of America's unbridled capitalist ambition and technical prowess; the identical twin kings of global finance, dressed in matching silver pinstripe suits... Lewis Mumford compared the towers to a gigantic pair of filing cabinets, while others said they looked like the boxes that the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building came in." (Wainwright "The 'filing cabinets' that became icons of America")

The first component is the migration from East to West, as prophesied by Horace Greeley (“Go West, young man!”) and enshrined in Tony Soprano’s beloved Westerns—films about rugged individualism and steely machismo. They depict the tension between civilization and the frontier, but also the reinvention of the self, American style. You go West to leave your old self (and sins) behind and become someone new. The first time we meet him, Tony is heading (roughly) West.

The second component is the movement from the big, bad city—where first-generation immigrants replicated rough versions of their home countries in neighborhoods prefaced with “Little”—to the boroughs or first ring of suburbs around the core city. The houses were small, but they at least had lawns. Second-generation immigrant families could live in places like the ones shown in *The Sopranos* credits and feel as if their family made it—or at least made it out. Their kids can play sandlot baseball, join civic organizations in Fourth of July parades down Main Street, and eat Chicken à la King, hot dogs, and apple pie in addition to spaghetti, lo mein, or lox. It’s the kind of place where Giuseppe and Angelina or Murray and Tovah can raise kids named Ryan and Jane.

This abbreviated migration, in which ordinary car trips become reenacted journeys toward becoming “real” Americans, continues into the third generation, as the grandchildren of immigrants move still farther out, settling into remote housing developments carved out of fields and forests—communities without community... (13-14)

Dana Polan meditates at length at the place where those credits end—the suburbs, a throbbing yet lifeless land of mindless consumerism:

Not a garden, not a regenerative Eden, the New Jersey of *The Sopranos* is a geography of constructed kitsch realities, such as the tacky box stores in which the state’s denizens fill up on products both useful and not. There is even, for these ersatz gangsters, an ersatz mass-culture version of the old country in the Italianissimo restaurant that awaits them in a strip mall. This is a form of comfort bought through things, through a generalized commodification of everyday life. And like the ever-ongoing New Jersey Beatles shows, there is a seeming endlessness to the ways new commodities show up to fill up one’s time and create further fresh potentials for comfort. Carmela, for instance, is caught in a cyclicity of consumerism in which Tony can buy her forgiveness for his sins (sexual and financial philandering, especially) by one more gift, one more glittering, glimmering luxury product—until later seasons, when she awkwardly tries to break free only to give up and give in. Having once had a priest tell her, toward the end of season 3, that the way she should deal with the fact that her luxury lifestyle comes from crime and blood money is to concentrate on the good parts of her life with Tony and separate off the bad, Carmela has come to build her own world of commodified artifice in her nouveau-riche house and in the cultural activities of the housewife (for example, a book group, reunions of girlfriends to work through all the titles on the AFI’s 100 top movies list, etc.). It

is more than indicative of her buying into—or being brought by Tony into—this way of life that when, in a Christmas dinner she hosts at the very end of season 6, her son A.J.’s inner-city Latina girlfriend tells her “You have a beautiful house,” she replies not simply with the expected “thank you” that mere etiquette would demand but with the narcissistic (but to her own mind honest) “Yes, we do.” (Polan 134-135)

Brett Martin draws another connection between *The Sopranos* and the written word—more specifically, to “one of postwar literature’s most potent tropes: [the] horror of the suburbs, which in novels from Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road* to Joseph Heller’s *Something Happened* to John Updike’s Rabbit series had come to represent everything crushing and confining to man’s essential nature.” (84) David Remnick, too, thinks Updike a good comparison: “Like John Updike’s Rabbit series or Philip Roth’s novels of the past decade, ‘The Sopranos’ teems with the mindless commerce and consumption of modern America.”<sup>7</sup> (“Family Guy”)

Commodities dominate the horizon of *The Sopranos*. One of the central plotlines of the “46 Long” concerns Paulie Walnuts’ indignant fury at the technological reproduction and commodification of Italian-American cuisine, symbolized in an espresso machine. (1.2) Carmela’s world is full of glittering rings and new cars; Tony’s is full of silk shirts; A.J.’s is full of computers and video games.

In a remarkably cogent remark, Tony Soprano tells Dr. Melfi: “You can talk about ‘every day being a gift,’ and ‘stopping to smell the roses’—but regular life’s got a way of picking away at it. The house, the shit you own—it drags you down. The kids, what they want. One bad idea

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<sup>7</sup> Updike shows up, actually, in Chase’s history as a TV writer. On an earlier project (*Northern Exposure*) where he had collaborated with eventual *Sopranos* writer Robin Green, their room of writers had been assigned John Updike readings by that show’s creators. “They were very conscious of wanting to do something that was not like television,” another staffer would say. “There were constant references to short-story writers and playwrights, not TV episodes,” Green would recall. Chase would later go on to be an executive producer for this show. (Martin 51)

The Updike connection is ironic to me because Updike was the Harvard roommate and friend of Christopher Lasch. In fact, Lasch becomes a character in one of Updike’s early short stories—Dawson in “The Christian Roommate.”

after another. Just working a cell phone menu is enough to make you scream.” (“Live Free or Die” 6.6)

That these goods eventually turn into trash gives Tony Soprano his business—he is in “waste management”—but it also becomes a sad reminder of a land where “everything turns to shit.” (“The Second Coming” 7.6)

It is a central conceit of *The Sopranos*’ imagination of modern life to see garbage as an inevitable underpinning of basic human activities. There is the waste that the body produces, and there is the waste of products and packaging that is cast off from the circulation of commodities through their life cycle. Tony Soprano claims to work in “waste management,” and *The Sopranos* is rich (if that’s the right word to describe garbage) in images of detritus, refuse, and junk. Typically, for instance, a scene in season 1 has Tony practicing his golf swing at a range right next to a garbage dump; it’s apt that a shot of him against a gigantic mass of refuse displays the mountain of plastic bottles and other garbage items as shimmering with an intensity of (artificial) colors, As if the world of waste were the most vibrant and visually sublime thing in the otherwise gray environment of strip-mall New Jersey. (Polan 136-137)

For Willy Staley, the architectural decomposition of American civic infrastructure—especially when stood in comparison to the beauty of foreign countries—constitutes a perfect symbol for the degradation of the American condition:

The show puts all this American social and cultural rot in front of characters wholly incapable of articulating it, if they even notice it. What is, for me, one of the show’s most memorable scenes has no dialogue at all. Tony and his crew have just returned from a business trip to Italy, during which they were delighted with the Old Country but also confronted with the degree of their alienation from their own heritage. They’re off the plane, and in a car traveling through Essex County. As the camera pans by the detritus of their disenchanted world — overpasses, warehouses — Tony, Paulie and Christopher are seeing their home with fresh eyes, and maybe wondering if their ancestors made a bad trade or if, somewhere along the line, something has gone horribly wrong. But we don’t know: For once, these arrogant, stupid and loquacious men are completely silent. (“Why is Every Young Person Watching”)



From the beginning, critics picked up on the fact that *The Sopranos* was an essentially American story. Elaine Showalter, early on, called the series “a cultural Rorschach test” which reflects many qualities of the quotidian minutia of American life. “...the show's admirers ... suggest the mobster is no more corrupt than other contemporary professionals and white-collar criminals in a sick culture.” (“Mob Scene”) Recent history suggests that this interpretation continues to predominate. “One oddity that can’t be ignored in this [recent] *Sopranos* resurgence,” Willy Staley writes, “is that, somewhat atypically for a TV fandom, there is an openly left-wing subcurrent within it — less ‘I feel so seen by this’ lefty than ‘intricate knowledge of different factions within the Philadelphia D.S.A.’ lefty.” (“Why is Every Young Person Watching”) He gestures to a Twitter page labelled “Socialist Sopranos Memes” (@gagagoolmarx), the podcast “Pod Yourself a Gun,” which is a *Sopranos* re-watch platform consistently hosting figures from left-wing media circles, as well other podcasts, such as “Red Scare,” which have hearkened back to images, symbols, events, and ideas from *The Sopranos* in their critiques of an American society in decline:

This new structural reading of “The Sopranos” was encapsulated neatly by Felix Biederman, a co-host of the leftist podcast “Chapo Trap House.” Recording another podcast in November 2020—after the presidential election was held but before it was called for Biden, a moment when nothing in this country seemed to be working—Biederman argued that the show is, at its heart, about the bathetic nature of decline. “Decline not as a romantic, singular, aesthetically breathtaking act of destruction,” he said, but as a humiliating, slow-motion slide down a hill into a puddle of filth. “You don’t flee a burning Rome with your beautiful beloved in your arms, barely escaping a murderous horde of barbarians; you sit down for 18 hours a day, enjoy fewer things than you used to, and take on the worst qualities of your parents while you watch your kids take on the worst qualities of you.”

Staley goes on to provide excerpts from an interview (conducted over Zoom, that symbol for the COVID era) with series creator David Chase:

Perhaps the greatest mystery of all, looking back on “The Sopranos” all these years later, is this: What was Chase seeing in the mid-’90s — a period when the United States’ chief geopolitical foe was Serbia, when the line-item veto and school uniforms were front-page news, when “Macarena” topped the charts — that compelled him to make a show that was so thoroughly pessimistic about this country?...

“I don’t think I felt like it was a good time... I felt that things were going downhill.” He’d become convinced America was, as Neil Postman’s 1985 polemic put it, “Amusing Ourselves to Death,” not an easy thing for a journeyman TV writer to accept... “There was nothing but crap out there. Crap in every sense. I was beginning to feel that people’s predictions about the dumbing-down of society had happened and were happening, and I started to see everything getting tawdry and cheap.” He mentioned a line from Arthur Miller’s 1968 play, “The Price”: “If they would close the stores for six months in this country there would be from coast to coast a regular massacre.”

“And that’s what I felt back in those days,” he said, “that everything was for sale — it was all about distraction, it didn’t seem serious. It all felt foolish and headed for a crash...”

We all have to live this way, in a landscape vandalized by increasingly inane and powerful flows of capital. Chase told me the real joke of the show was not “What if a mobster went to therapy?” The comedic engine, for him, was this: What if things had become so selfish and narcissistic in America that even the mob couldn’t take it? “That was the whole thing,” he said. “America was so off the rails that everything that the Mafia had done was nothing compared to what was going on around them.” (“Why is Every Young Person Watching”)

Elsewhere, David Chase has also had this to say about *The Sopranos*: “It certainly—I think—describes American materialism; American psychobabble; the victim society that we have, that we’re developing here, the society of non-accountability; you know, the rugged American Yankee guy doesn’t really seem to exist anymore. So in that sense, it’s an American phenomenon.” (“A Sitdown with the Sopranos”)

To characterize the cult of consumption and the decline of American know-how—in short, the death of the American Dream—in psychiatric terms is to recall the arguments once made by Christopher Lasch, the American cultural historian and social critic who characterized postmodern America as a “culture of narcissism.” In what follows, I want to schematically trace the regions of overlap in both of these bodies of work. *The Sopranos* and Lasch’s work alike venture a

psychoanalytic critique of postmodern America centered on the impasses between the family and capitalism, and some of the same signposts crop up repeatedly through each one: disordered personalities and fragile families; a world of commerce that is at once lifeless and deadly; a society that doesn't know what to do about any of this—because of its inability to ask the tough questions—and thus resorts to repeating the familiar. *The Sopranos* posits a psychoanalytic rampage against a money-making machine by dramatizing each step of the exchange process—production, corruption, consumption, waste, reproduction—as well as the perpetual unhappiness this system imposes upon the members who operate within it; and Lasch's work might help us to locate this historically and materially, within the dynamics of capitalism.

Ever since Robert Warshow's expose on "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," critics and scholars have understood that the mafia genre constitutes a generalized symbol for American capitalism itself. "This thing is a pyramid, since time immemorial—shit runs downhill, money goes up," Tony says at one point. ("For All Debts Public and Private" 4.1) Yet Tony's business, *la cosa nostra*—"this thing of ours"—had first formed itself, the myth goes, as a form of collective self-advancement undertaken by Italian-American immigrants who were discriminated against and exploited by American labor practices. The crime "Families" formed their own rugged economy within the American market and undermined the 'interests' by organizing crime, by rationalizing anarchy. They also had to institutionalize order from within by demanding obedience to a set of unquestionable yet impersonal rules—chief among them "omerta," the code of silence. Whereas elsewhere success in the free market was guaranteed by competition and self-interest, the Mafia represented a mode of economic activity that produced value through cooperation. This subculture also prided itself on resisting full assimilation by the homogenizing effects of American capitalism:

preserving older folk habits and values and maintaining a community. This self-myth is embodied best by Tony's recollection of it in therapy:

TONY: Excuse me, let me tell you something: when America opened the floodgates and let all us Italians in—what do you think they were doing it for? Because they were trying to save us from poverty? No, they did it because they needed us. They needed us to build their cities and dig their subways and to make them richer. The Carnegies and the Rockefellers—they needed worker bees, and there we were. But some of us didn't want to swarm around their hive and lose who we were. We wanted to stay Italian and preserve the things that meant something to us: honor, and family, and loyalty. And some of us wanted a piece of the action. Now, we weren't educated like the Americans, but we had the balls to take what we wanted. And those other fucks, those other—the J.P. Morgans, they were crooks and killers too, but that was the business, right? The American way? ("From Where to Eternity" 2.9)

But one of the central comic conventions of *The Sopranos* is the terribly thin line between the violent anarchy of the mob and the rationalized society around them. Viewers watch these gangsters pimp and murder for a living one minute, and then see them walking through a shopping mall the next. If viewers were about to harbor any illusions about the distance between the work we real-life Americans do every day against the fake gangsters on TV, like clockwork, it throws this scene at them to dispel such a notion. Dr. Melfi, sitting at a dinner table with the Cusamanos, next door neighbors to the Sopranos, and other upper-middle class corporate-suburban types (not totally different from HBO's original client base), overhears this conversation:

GUEST 1: What does that do to property values, having a gangster living next door?

CUSAMANO: Are you kidding? Safest block in the knave. And being a gangster, what does it mean, anyway?

GUEST 1: Yeah, that's true. Some of the shit I see in the board room, I don't know if I'd make a distinction.

GUEST 2: Oh, will you please! It's not the same.

CUSAMANO: Bargain? Brides? I don't know. Sometimes I think the only thing separating the American businesses from the mobs is fucking whacking a guy.

Even if it nostalgically yearns for a sturdier, communitarian, more dignified mode of organization, Tony's current business is in a state of critical decline. He "came in at the end"; "things are trending downwards." ("Pilot" 1.1) Even the code of silence is up for sale in Tony's time. The influx of drugs into the landscape of organized crime seems to be responsible: the mobsters started peddling 'coke' and 'H' to bring in greater quantities of cash, but RICO predicates have allowed the FBI to charge crimes—especially crimes involved with drugs—with extreme prison sentences. By threatening them with interminable prison sentences, the Feds can position the mobsters into ratting on 'friends of theirs.' It had always been a deadly enterprise; but at least before one could rely on his companions. "This thing of ours," indeed, is in a state of decline; it is now 'every man for himself,' the Hobbesian 'war of all against all.' The work that the Sopranos gangsters do constitutes a mere mirror image of the work that their opposition, the Feds do; and their labor is just as alienated.

No wonder why Tony would like to insulate a part of his life from this Leviathan-esque death-force. He does what all Americans do: invest his real hopes in private life. Tony thus conceives of his 'other' life, his nuclear family, as a "haven" in his "heartless world," as Christopher Lasch once phrased that conception: the family, on this view, presents itself as an oasis, a reservoir of affection, warmth, and oneness to which he can withdraw from the traumas and miseries of the workday. "As business, politics, and diplomacy all grow more savage and warlike, men seek a haven in private life, in personal relations, above all in the family—the last refuge of love and decency." (*Haven in a Heartless World* xix; 6-8) Carmela, Meadow, and Anthony Jr. are the people he is willing to domesticate his outlaw spirit for; he has given his life for them—and he wouldn't hesitate to kill for them, either. Most of the time, however, this schema

fails because Tony's home life fails to recompense the horrors of the world of commerce. Tony is afraid of losing his family. ("Pilot" 1.1) He worries that his children will reject him (and his authority) for his criminal career; and his marriage with his wife, Carmela, is strained by suspicion: he entertains a *goomar* (or mistress), and she is well aware of it.

And another central comic conventions is that Tony's Family is also, in fact, his family. Tony is forced to share room and power with his "Uncle Junior"; he himself is an uncle but acts more like a father to Christopher Moltisanti; and he has taken his father's place in the garbage and loansharking businesses. The boundaries between home and work turn out to be incredibly unclear.

*The Sopranos* thus gives some narrative expression to Christopher Lasch's argument that capitalism has invaded and is responsible for the decline of family life in America. The 'collapse of the family,' a matter of so much cultural controversy from the sixties onwards, did not originate in that decade, and Lasch understood that it certainly was not to blame on feminism. "The sanctity of the home is a sham in a world dominated by giant corporations and by the apparatus of mass promotion." (Lasch *Haven in a Heartless World* xxiii) Lasch traces it instead to the end of the nineteenth century, during the onslaught of the second industrial revolution in America. Work had formerly been institutionalized in the home; but American capitalism brought the father and his labor out of the home and collectivized it in the factory for private profit. "The socialization of production," he then argues, was followed by "the socialization of reproduction"—the invasion of the privacy of the home in the twentieth century by the "helping professions" ("educators, psychiatrists, social workers, and penologists,") who came to the mother offering services to assist her in the 'business' of child-rearing, but, more often than not, ended up undermining her authority (and the father's) with their "therapeutic" ethos. (*Haven in a Heartless World* xix-xxiv; 3-21; 167-189; *The Culture of Narcissism* 154-186; 218-236)

*The Sopranos*, too, seems to hold a deep reservation about a fatherless world. In it, fathers are frequently replaced with uncles who disappoint. (Even while the boys who do have their fathers present—who are nearly always given their fathers name—perpetuate the worst qualities of their fathers and become the disappointment themselves.) Furthermore, even these “helping professionals” end up cropping up in the show. For instance, Meadow is sent to a psychotherapist after the murder of her boyfriend, Jackie Aprile Jr. (“No-Show” 4.2) Tony and Carmela had hoped that the psychotherapist would help them discourage Meadow from skipping a semester of college to go to Europe, but instead that professional tells her—not without a little condescension—that her parents need to “learn that education is a lifelong process” and that she should “blow off their self-esteem issues.” In “Down Neck,” for instance, when A.J. has misbehaved and stolen sacramental wine from his Catholic day school, the school brings in an adolescent psychologist who gives A.J. a “battery of tests” to determine whether or not he has A.D.D. (1.7) Tony and Carmela ponder whether or not they should actually punish A.J. for his actions: “If he had polio, would you hit him?”

There are much broader considerations about punishment for Tony and Carmela. At another point, after Meadow has trashed Livia’s old house during a party, Tony and Carmela dread:

CARMELA: There has to be consequences. What kind of parents would we be if we let her get away with this?

TONY: Typical.

CARMELA: I know plenty of parents still crack the whip.

TONY: Yeah. That’s what they tell you.

CARMELA: As a parent today, you are over a barrel no matter what they do. You take away her car, you become her chauffeurs. You ground her, you gotta stay home weekends and be prison guards.

TONY: And if you throw her out, the social services will bring her back and we’d be in front of the judge. She’s not 18 yet.

CARMELA: That's your solution, to throw your daughter out?

TONY: All I'm saying, with the laws today, you can't even restrain your kid physically, 'cause she can sue you for child abuse.

CARMELA: There has to be consequences.

TONY: And there will be. I hear you, okay? Let's just not overplay our hand because if she figures out we're powerless, we're fucked. ("Toodle-Fucking-Oo" 2.3)

There is a deep irony about a professional criminal and his wife complaining about 'consequences' and 'the law.' In the first place, Meadow acts out because she does not respect her parents' authority in the first place; her father breaks the rules for a living, and her mother takes his "blood money," in the words of Rabbi-cum-shrink Dr. Krakower,<sup>8</sup> and uses it to buy "shit."

Dr. Krakower shows up only once in the show—an episode entitled "Second Opinion." (3.7) The title of the episode refers to a cancer diagnosis for Uncle Junior, but also to Carmela, who is going through a 'clinical' crisis of her own. Dr. Melfi refers her to Dr. Krakower to talk; when she arrives, he lashes her for her continued complicity with Tony's way of life.

KRAKOWER: You said he's a depressed criminal, prone to anger, serially unfaithful. Is that your definition of a "good man"?

CARMELA: I thought psychiatrists weren't judgmental.

KRAKOWER: Patients want to be excused from their predicament... because of events in their childhood. That's what psychiatry has become in America. Visit any shopping mall or ethnic pride parade to witness the results.

CARMELA: What we say in here stays in here?

KRAKOWER: By ethical code and by law.

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<sup>8</sup> In their footnotes, Seitz and Sepinwall scribble, "Krakower's last name is very similar to the last name of Sigfried Kracauer, the German sociologist, social critic, and film theorist"—and, if we will remember, member of the Frankfurt School.



CARMELA: His crimes... they are organized crime.

KRAKOWER: The Mafia?

CARMELA: Oh, Jesus. Oh, so what? So what? He betrays me every week with these whores.

KRAKOWER: Probably the least of his misdeeds.

This irony demonstrates what Lasch describes as a transition from “retributive” to “therapeutic” justice and the decline of authority in general, which “converts outmoded concepts such as guilt and sin into medical ones.” (*Haven in a Heartless World* 12-21; *Culture of Narcissism* 229-232) It’s an irony which comes to a head when Tony learns that Meadow’s soccer coach has raped one of her teammates, and he wants to mete out justice on his own. (“Boca” 1.9) After telling Dr. Melfi about this, the following argument unfolds:

TONY: There’s guys in prison that have done half the damage this prick has!

MELFI: The judicial system has gotten much better in dealing with sexual predators.

TONY: Oh yeah, let’s impeach him!

MEFLI: If you’re telling me of intent to harm this person, I must warn you of my duty to alert law enforcement.

TONY: I don’t know why I tell you anything.

MEFLI: I’m interested in why you feel punishing this man falls upon you.

TONY: Well it sure doesn’t fall upon you!

MEFLI: What do you mean?

TONY: What would you do? You’d call the cops, who’d get some judge, who’d give him psychiatric counseling so maybe he can talk about his unhappy childhood, and we can have sympathy for the fuck, ‘cause he’s the real victim here, right?

You know what you do, you stick your head in the sand, ‘cause that’s what people like you do!

Of course, the joke is that this is the very premise of *The Sopranos* itself. Much of Tony's therapy revolves around his own familial trauma, especially with his mother. Not that this produces much in the way of answers for Tony's condition. The first (and arguably only) time that Dr. Melfi actually provides us any sort of clinical diagnosis of Tony is when he threatens to leave therapy for the first time: "I thought we made some progress on your narcissism," she mumbles. ("Meadowlands" 1.4) This comes directly after a therapy scene that ended the previous episode, "Denial, Anger, and Acceptance" (resounding in psychoanalytic overtones) that rendered much of the same impression. (1.3) Earlier in that episode, Tony is called a "golem" by a Hasidic Jew who he extorts. He talks about this with Dr. Melfi, on top of other feelings of grief derived from the impending death of his friend Jackie Aprile, who is acting boss of the family. "Got called a Frankenstein at work today," Tony groans. Dr. Melfi asks: "Do you feel like Frankenstein? A thing? Lacking humanity? Lacking human feelings?"

The term "narcissism" pops up a few more times across *The Sopranos*. Once, notably, at the end of the second season as Tony's sister Janice is about to leave town after murdering her fiancé, she asks him, "What's wrong with our family, Tony?" He responds by saying, "I go to a shrink. She says that our mother is a narcissistic personality." ("Knight in White Satin Armor" 2.12)

Lasch, following a generation of "culture and personality" sociologists and the Freud-plus-Marx social theorists of the Frankfurt School—both of whom suggested that certain character types and personality organizations can be taken as 'representatives', so to speak, of their respective cultures as a whole—insists that changes in the structure of the family would be bound to be accompanied by changes in the structure of personality. Lasch concludes that the absence of the father (and the abnegation of parental authority in general) means that the inner world of the child,

the “primary” narcissist, is never fully repaired against reality and remains dominated by early unconscious fantasies of omnipotence and worthlessness, and that the narcissistic personality is the new prototype of American capitalism. He supports this claim by reference to an explosion of clinical literature beginning in the post-War period that reported an increase of patients under the umbrella of conditions generally known as “anti-social”; especially borderline personalities and pathological narcissists. This work—especially that of Otto Kernberg—described a character type with an embattled or ‘minimal’ self (Ego) that has withdrawn libidinal investment in the outside world and which is bombarded by a crippling conflict between insatiable desire (Id) and intense self-scrutiny (Superego). (*Haven in a Heartless World* 62-96; 134-166; *The Culture of Narcissism* 31-51)

Lasch begins his book on the “culture of narcissism” with a description of the “new narcissist” and his times, a profile which aptly fits Tony Soprano and his New Jersey:

This book... describes a way of life that is dying—the culture of competitive individualism, which in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self. Strategies of narcissistic survival now present themselves as emancipation from the repressive conditions of the past...

... the “authoritarian personality” no longer represents the prototype of the economic man. Economic man himself has given way to the psychological man of our times—the final product of bourgeois individualism. The new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety. He seeks not to inflict his own certainties on others but to find a meaning in life. Liberated from the superstitions of the past, he doubts even the reality of his own existence. Superficially relaxed and tolerant, he finds little use for dogmas of racial and ethnic purity but at the same time forfeits the security of group loyalties and regards everyone as a rival for the favors conferred by a paternalistic state. His sexual attitudes are permissive rather than puritanical, even though his emancipation from ancient taboos brings him no sexual peace. Fiercely competitive in his demand for approval and acclaim, he distrusts competition because he associates it unconsciously with an unbridled urge to destroy. Hence he repudiates the competitive ideologies that flourished at an earlier stage of capitalist development and distrusts even their limited expression in sports and games. He extols cooperation and teamwork while harboring deeply antisocial impulses. He praises respect for rules and regulations in the secret belief that they do not apply to himself. Acquisitive in the sense that his cravings have no limits, he

does not accumulate goods and provisions against the future, in the manner of the acquisitive individualist of nineteenth-century political economy, but demands immediate gratification and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire.

The narcissist has no interest in the future because, in part, he has so little interest in the past. He finds it difficult to internalize happy associations or to create a store of loving memories with which to face the latter part of his life, which under the best of conditions always brings sadness and pain. (xv-xvii)

*The Sopranos* is a story about the history of a country, a people, a family, a person. “Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” in Tony Soprano; he travels the great length of the journey from Avellino to Ellis Island to Newark to North Caldwell every day, up the “guinea gulch.” His story is a newer version of the myth of the individualist cowboy, untethered to the past or to any commitments in the present. (Tony loves watching Westerns.) Although he experiences his isolation as gutting danger, not as an overwhelming sense of possibility. He loses the extensions of his family tree along the way until all that is left is a wife and kids. But even then, in both Tony’s family and his Family, from what once was whole has become fragmented. He suspects that his family will not always love him back. His colleagues betray him daily. (He, himself, betrays his own loyalties by coming to therapy.) In both the home and in work, he longs to restore a lost world of togetherness, to reclaim a “thing of ours,” “a renewed sense of family, heritage, coherent truths, mental health,” in David Remnick’s words; but in every corner of his life, things are getting worse and worse as time goes on. (“Family Guy”) *La cosa nostra*, a heroic world of men working together to provide for their families, has eroded into *la cultural del narcisismo*—a bland world where no one works together at the jobsite or in the home; labor is as dissatisfying as ever, but the agony of home life makes the sacrifices seem pointless. The best people can do is buy today what they couldn’t yesterday (or may not have the opportunity to tomorrow.)

If the question facing viewers of *The Sopranos* is whether or not Tony can change, the obvious answer is no. His interminable psychotherapy never brings him to repair his inner emptiness nor gets him to consider leaving the life of crime. In fact, no one really changes in *The Sopranos*: all of its characters seem stuck in a repetition-compulsion:

In *The Sopranos*, such “forgetting” is both structural and thematic. That is, some of the effect derives from the nature of episodic television and its concern for relatively self-contained offerings that tell full, if miniature, stories in their own right, only to start the process all again with the next installment. Some, though, comes from the particular story world *The Sopranos* traffics in. On the one hand, the Mafia operates in the television series as a veritable army, where those sacrificed on the field of battle are always able to be replaced by the next soldier in line and where there will, in any case, be new battles to be fought (and new stories to be told of them). On the other hand, many of the men and women in this particular world are presented as figures of somewhat stunted personality and ambition, fixed in their personality traits, and given over to desires of the moment which take priority over any long-term vision or concern with growth. In some cases, characters rely on the others around them to forget past insults, to overlook the consequences of change and accept it as merely an extension of the present, or to bury the hatchet and proceed as if it were all business as usual. The show, and also the characters in it, frequently work in a sort of iterative mode where they submit to the same behavior again and again. (Polan 58)

This may bring us to our final question: why should viewers—especially young spectators who were only children when the show was airing—continue to take an interest in it, and especially if it possesses such a doomed consciousness? Dana Polan wrote in 2009:

Might this not have something to do with the larger historical moment in which *The Sopranos* appears and in which it, too, is easy to feel ironic or cynical about progress? Politics, for instance, seems wearily cyclical: the run of *The Sopranos* coincided with a new Middle Eastern war for an older one, a new George Bush for an older one, a new Clinton presidential hopeful for an older one, and on and on. Turns of centuries (and turns of millennia especially) are, as historian Norman Cohn famously argued, fraught moments in which it is possible to wonder just how far we’ve come, how far we can go, and *The Sopranos*, debuting in 1999, can seem very much of its time in its posing of questions about narrative and progress. (64)

Given the cyclical nature of the society in which we live in—grounded upon an economic circuit which never stops turning stuff out, like the digestive system—it still has much to say about America. There are no signs that any of the trends critiqued in *The Sopranos* have reversed. Nor is it (or should it be) the role of the social critic to soothe the anxieties brought up by the issues they raise. *The Sopranos* is a dramatization of America, the good too but mostly the ugly. The social criticism of *The Sopranos* has not aged poorly; in fact it has not aged at all.

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